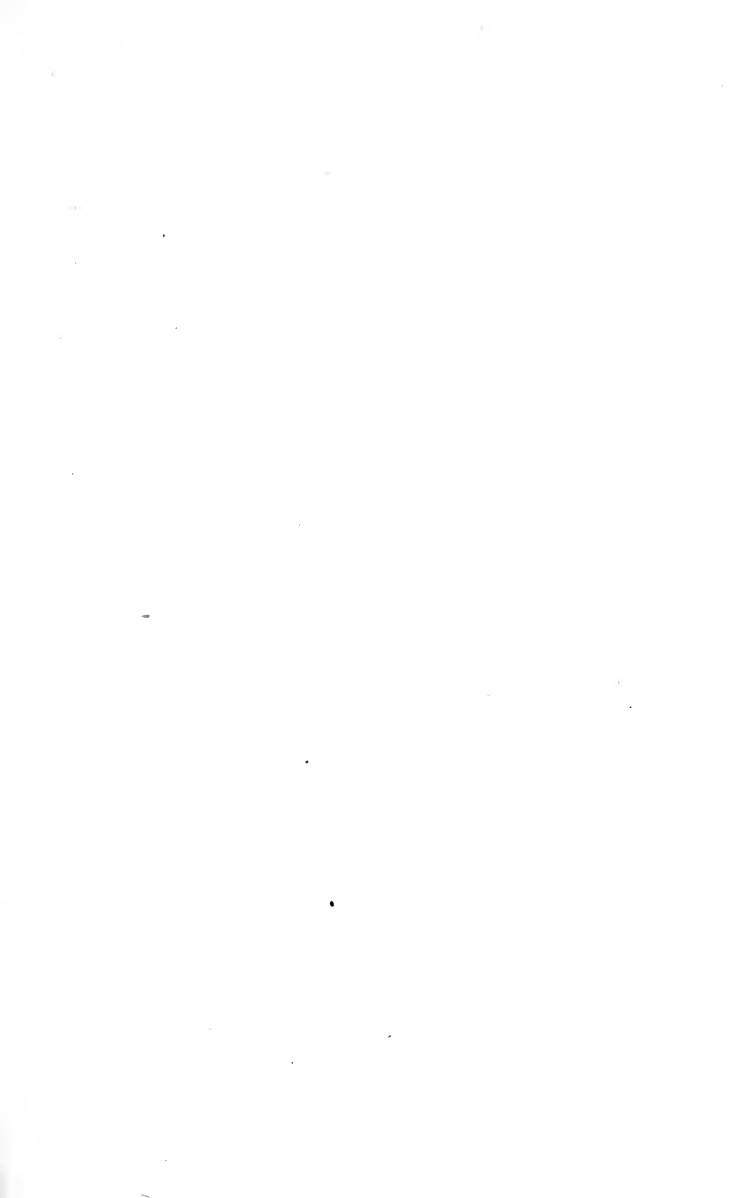
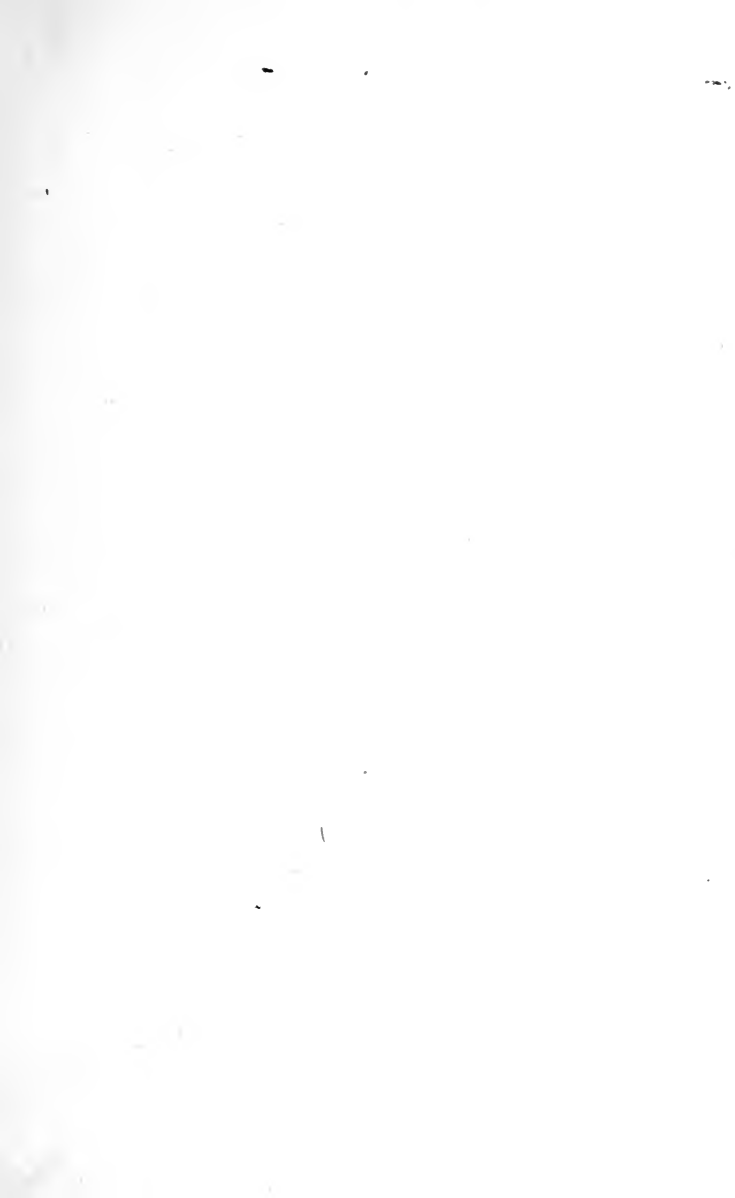


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Overland for Gold

By
F. H. CHELEY



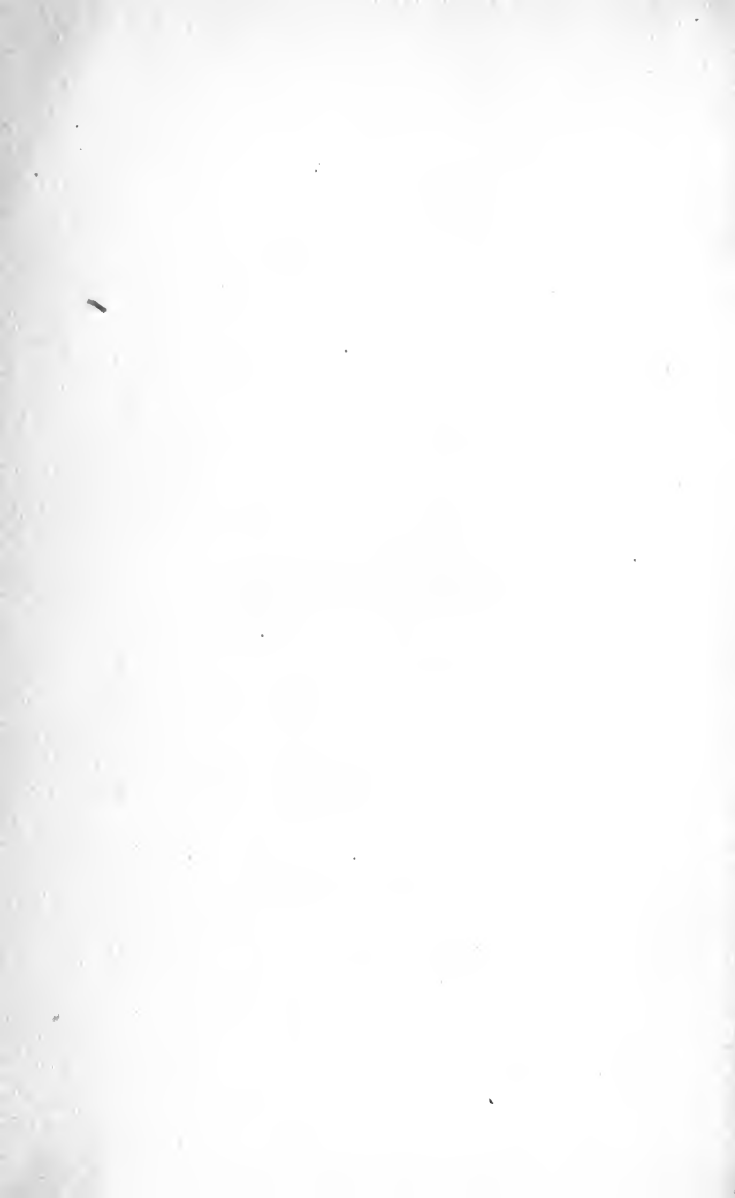
THE ABINGDON PRESS
NEW YORK **CINCINNATI**

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To
JACK
BORN IN THE SHADOW OF PIKE'S PEAK

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CHAPTER I

"PIKE'S PEAK OR BUST!"

"PIKE'S PEAK or bust!" laughed my uncle Herman Trout, merrily, as he opened the door, and then, noting our surprised faces, he added, more seriously, "Yes, I'm off for Colorado at last." He poised his great bulk in the doorway, his merry eyes fairly sparkling with unconcealed excitement, awaiting my mother's comment on his decision.

"Tilly," he said at length, seeing that mother had no reply, "I have the old fever again, and I've finally decided to go. The boys tell me they are actually getting the yellow stuff out in chunks in the hills north of Pike's Peak, and I have decided to get in on the ground floor."

My mother slowly rose from her chair and looked at my uncle a bit reproachfully, although she had often predicted that he would have the gold fever before fall if the newspapers kept on, while he had as often

scouted the idea, declaring that he was far too old a man to turn adventurer again. One good look into his face now, however, convinced her that her surmise had been right from the start; yet she was sorry, for she had so hoped he would not go.

"But, Herman," she said, half wistfully, as she crossed over and put her hands on the back of my chair, "how ever am I to get on without you, with these two big growing boys needing your counsel and help every day?"

Hale, who sat at the table studying, raised his head quickly and ventured a suggestion. "Then let us go with you, Uncle Herman!" He suddenly brushed aside the books he had been studying and rose, looking straight into my uncle's face. "In two more weeks my last examination will be over, and then I must hunt a job. Getting gold in chunks, you say? I wouldn't need very many 'chunks' to enable me to go on to college in the fall, would I? Besides, Uncle Herman, such a trip with you would be a worthwhile experience for any boy."

As the lad talked on he became possessed with his idea and grew very serious. He

was a splendid specimen of real American boyhood as he stood there watching intently every expression on his uncle’s face. His body was trim, well knit and muscular, and as erect as a soldier’s. He was strong, clean-cut, and just as hard as nails, for Hale Trout was an athlete of no mean reputation in our little city, and incidentally was the very idol of uncle Herman’s heart.

“I’ve been wondering for a whole month just where I was to get a job, for work is so very scarce and money so awfully tight. You know, uncle, I have decided definitely now to fit myself for an engineer, and such a trip as you propose would be great normal practice for me. I have no doubt but that there will be trails and bridges to build and all sorts of mine machinery to erect, will there not?”

Herman Trout eyed the boy critically for a moment before he spoke. He seemed to be mentally calculating whether the lad would be equal to all the strenuous work that such a journey would necessarily involve or not. Hale interrupted his thought by hurrying on:

“How will you get there, uncle? It must

be at least a thousand miles, and nothing but pony express running to Denver."

"I plan to go by ox-train from Saint Joe, my lad, and I plan to take with me enough simple mining machinery to do the job right. You see, my three years in the California diggings taught me a great deal. I would not be a 'greenhorn' or 'tenderfoot' this time, which, of course, counts for something. This Colorado discovery seems to be largely lode claims with very little placer gold, and such mining, to be profitable in a big way, would require our operating at least a small stamp mill."

Just what prompted me to speak up at this point I do not now remember, but at any rate, boylike, I blurted out on the inspiration of the moment:

"Just such a trip as that would make me strong again too, uncle, for after all, what I need is not all of this medicine and tender care, but more exercise and fresh air and sunshine. Besides, you will certainly have to have a bookkeeper and secretary of some sort, if you are going into it that big, won't you?"

"I believe you are right, son," he an-

swered kindly, and then after a moment's deep thought he turned abruptly to my mother, who was still standing behind my chair.

"Tilly, such an arrangement would be your opportunity to visit the little daughter in the country, and I verily believe that the change would do us all good, even this puny boy. It had never entered my head to take these lads along until they spoke, but the idea strikes me very favorably. I'll need lots of help, that is quite certain, and it——"

"Hurrah for you, uncle!" shouted Hale in a very fever of new excitement. "I'll gladly be your stable boy, or anything else that you desire, if you will but let me go."

I noted that mother had become a bit uneasy, and a moment later she turned abruptly away toward the kitchen, saying she would prepare tea. My uncle also noted her anxiety over the new development, and so hastily excused himself too, with the promise that he would discuss the matter more fully with us after supper. Hale hurried to the kitchen to talk the matter over with mother, and I buried myself in the evening paper.

"Fabulous Discoveries of Gold in the

Rockies!" ran the big head lines, and then followed story after story written in such a stirring way that in half an hour I found myself on fire with a real gold fever. I was wild to get at once to this wonderful West-land, where mere men dug enormous fortunes in a fortnight.

The sentiment of "O Susanna" that had permeated every village and hamlet only twelve short years before, when every man that could possibly finance the trip, had joined in that wild march across twenty-five hundred miles of Western, Indian-infested prairies in search of California gold, now suddenly changed to the equally exciting cry of "Pike's Peak or bust!" Once more, even in the face of all the harrowing tales of suffering, starvation, and death that had followed in the wake of that other tremendous current of gold-seekers—once more the mysterious word "gold" seemed to hypnotize the people and make them forget the army of shadowy ghosts that even yet line every Overland trail from Independence to the Golden Gate. It was but three years since the terrible panic of 1857, and money was scarce. There was little or no business ac-

tivity, and on the whole the future business outlook was discouraging. It was not surprising, then, that this new and wonderful discovery of gold should cause such a tremendous sensation throughout the land.

I had eagerly read every paper, including the editorials, and when I came upon the list of names of local men who were preparing to start at once for the gold fields, I was not surprised to see my uncle's name heading the list. Then I realized for a very certainty that he was going. As I fell to thinking it all over, however, I realized that it probably never would have happened in the world if my uncle had not once before been afflicted with the "gold fever." I say "afflicted" advisedly, because with that independent, self-reliant, square-jawed individual to be really interested in or enthusiastic about anything was to make that thing his very life, at least for the time being. If he really started, it would be "Pike's Peak or bust!" I was certain. He had joined that "surge of fools to California," as he often referred to the party of young business men like himself who hardly a dozen years before had formed a company, pooled their every re-

source, and then cast their hope on the hazard of a single die at Sutter's Ford.

Many a long winter evening, before my father's death, we had all sat about our cozy fireplace and listened with mouths agog to the wonderful yarns of his two years among the "California diggin's": how they had chartered an old schooner and set out undaunted, in the true spirit of youth, on a ten-thousand-mile voyage around the Horn; how he had been left almost a penniless man, and then, after two memorable years, that were fairly crammed with wild adventures in the mountains, and hair-breadth escapes from starvation, Indians, and the ravages of disease, he had "struck it rich" in a reasonable way, and had returned via Panama to our little quiet village, a hero to every boy in the town, and especially to my younger brother Hale and myself.

This same uncle Herman had since my earliest recollections been very fond of my mother and of Hale. Of course he had always been friendly to me too, as his only brother's eldest son, but was never enthusiastic about my puny body or my love for books, of which he knew almost nothing. So

it always had seemed perfectly natural to me, after the death of my father, that he should come to live with us. Of his own accord he chose to settle my father’s many debts, and took upon himself the no small task of being a father to us two boys. He never told me so for a certainty, but mother and I were both of the opinion that between my father’s debts and the hard years of the panic which followed, my uncle’s fortune had shrunk to a very modest sum. As I look back over it all now I am certain that it was this shortage of money, after all, that decided him to again “play his hand,” as he used to say, “with old Mother Nature” in the gold fields.

CHAPTER II

WE ARE TAKEN INTO THE COMPANY

THAT evening my uncle brought a Mr. Cyrus Toleman home to tea with him, and such a talker as the man was! He was tall and handsome, and had a careless way of chuckling every now and then when something was said that especially pleased him. He hadn't been with us many minutes until we discovered that, beyond a question, he was a thoroughbred cowboy and trailer from the big Western cattle range. I guessed that he was an expert at all sorts of outfitting and that in all probability my uncle had it in mind to take Toleman along with him to have charge of the ox-train and to find the trail; for up to this time all Western roads were mere trails and oftentimes a heavy rain would completely obliterate them for miles at a stretch. He told us that many of the old routes used by the forty-niners had already become overgrown with the herbage of the plain, and some had even

faded back into the desert completely, so that it took an experienced trailer to find the way.

I remember that he and my uncle talked for an hour about wagons and oxen and supplies, apparently forgetting Hale and me, until suddenly the bell rang, and my uncle ushered in a dried-up, weasened little man, whom he introduced to us as Jacob Henderson. I at once recognized him as the proprietor of a little handy-man's shop on one of our side streets, and I had often heard him referred to as the "jail bird."

He was a mechanic, a pattern maker, a filer of keys, and, in fact, a Jack-of-all-trades. His eyes were small and cold-gray. He was very small of stature, and a smile rarely, if ever, crossed his deep-lined, bronzed face. He was entirely business, apparently, and had no time nor relish for pleasantries. It surprised me a great deal that my uncle should even think of taking this sour, unagreeable man with him on such a journey as he was now proposing, for if there was one thing my uncle enjoyed, more than one of my mother's good meals, it was an hour of fellowship with a kindred spirit and a few good stories for seasoning. I could not

imagine his living as intimately as a thousand-mile trip with heavily loaded ox-drawn carts would necessitate, with a confirmed pessimist that reduced every transaction of life down to a dollars-and-cents basis and held every fellow man forever in suspicion. Some way, it was like trying to mix oil and water, and I was at a loss to understand it.

As their conversation ran on, however, on stamp mills, windlasses, and power cradles, I began to understand that such an enterprise as my uncle was suggesting simply must have at least one mechanic to set up the machinery. I also came to realize that a dozen or fifteen heavily loaded wagons could not possibly be pulled over a thousand miles of sun-baked, prairie-dog pitted Western prairie land and then on perhaps into the very heart of the Rocky Mountains without constant repairs and mechanical attention. My uncle could manage a pick and shovel with marvelous ease and effectiveness, but when it came to replacing a wagon reach, resetting a wagon tire, or erecting a stamp mill, with its maze of sluices, screens, and rollers, he was a wise enough man to know that he must have a machinist. He

confided to me many a night, however, as we lay rolled in our blankets beneath one of our wagons, or as we rode on that long, tedious march over alkaline flats, that he would give a good gold mine if Jake Henderson was in the bottom of the sea or far up in Alaska, instead of with our party.

It took them nearly two hours to complete a rough list of the outfit. It included a twelve-stamp mill, with necessary boiler, engine, and repairs, to say nothing of the many smaller tools understood to be necessary for the extracting of gold from the rock. Then there was a supply of powder, a quantity of quicksilver, copper plates for the sluices, various chemicals, and an enormous list of provisions—enough, in fact, to keep the entire company at least a year. Yet how in the world they ever expected to get any variety of food out of plain flour, beans, salt pork, coffee, sugar, and corn meal was more than I could see; but when Toleman urged that they add a few delicacies, such as tea, dried fruit, bacon, hardtack, and syrup, I began to have some hopes of fair food, and felt that I understood Toleman better already.

When the list was finally completed and the cost estimated, my uncle suddenly turned to Toleman and said:

"Cy, I am thinking strongly of taking these two boys with me." Then, with a good-humored twinkle, he added, "Of course we perfectly understand they won't amount to much as prospectors, but we have to have drivers, you know, and doubtless they will do to skin mules, if we have any; at least they can drive oxen. Then, too, they will help to keep me from being too lonesome, for I can't say I just relish the idea of living a hundred long days with just Missourian teamsters and a cowboy." He eyed Jake from the corner of his eye, and seeing the sour look of disapproval, he added: "Then, too, Jake here is so profoundly talkative, and so humorous, I'll need some one to talk business with at times, I suppose, as a relief from his foolishness."

Cy Toleman just roared, and I knew full well from that moment that he and I were to be the best of friends; but Jake only glowered at us with such evident displeasure that I disliked him without knowing just why.

"Take 'em along by all odds," laughed Cy, good naturedly. "That chap yonder," pointing to Hale, "looks perfectly able to look out for himself. I've been noticing his arms and shoulders—Jerusalem! but I'd about as leave be caressed by a Missouri mule as hit on the jib with one of those." Then turning on Jake, who sat with a disdainful, sour look on his leathery face, he added: "Herman, that boy will make a good overseer for Jake when he gets too blamed obstreperous with them funny sayings of his." Then he laughed again in such a hearty way that my mother came hurrying in to see what was going on that could be so funny, for some way she was already feeling sad.

"Well, Tilly," said my uncle, "we have about finished our plans, and I have decided, if *you* are willing, of course, to take the boys with us, and furthermore to take them into the company——"

Jake Henderson jumped to his feet in a fit of anger, resembling an irate bantam rooster about to challenge the world. "Into the company!" he roared. "Well, I should say not. You said but a moment ago to take them as drivers. Now, I don't propose to

put any of *my* money into a company of boys. What's more, Trout, I won't. I've subscribed half of the total expense of this trip, and you the other half. We may hire other men and boys at a stipulated wage, but take them into the company? No! What do a bunch of schoolboys know about gold mining, anyway?" he demanded.

I saw Toleman sit up, stare at the bantam to make sure he wasn't dreaming things, and then chuckle to himself again. My mother, hot with indignation, turned to my uncle and was about to speak, when he forestalled her. I was fairly startled by his changed manner. His voice was cold and stern, and his eyes flashed. I had never before seen him so angry.

"No, Jake, you are mistaken," he said, slowly. "You won't subscribe half, or *any* part of this expense. I've changed my mind about this company since I last talked with you, and I have decided to give these two boys your share. Toleman and I will own the balance. But we'll be glad to *hire you* as our master mechanic at say——"

Jake was beside himself with rage. "Hire *me!* By the everlasting gods, no!" he

snapped. "I'm no hireling. Yesterday this was to be *our* company, and now——"

"That was my first thought," interrupted my uncle, "but the idea of taking these chaps along with me hadn't entered my head then; and, besides, we reached no agreement. I have decided that these two boys will be of more use to the company in the long run than you, Jake." He looked the little man straight in the eye as he continued, "Besides, I have never caught either of them in a lie, and I have no time on this trip to nurse hot-tempered fools."

Jake was too surprised and too disappointed to say more just then, but his angry red face bespoke his emotions. He glowered at Hale and me with a hate that knew no bounds. I believe it was this churlish attitude that finally decided my uncle against him.

But, Herman," roared the little man, "I have already turned down two other offers to go, in favor of this one, and now it is too late to get in on any," insisted Jake, "and what is more, Mr. Trout, it's a dirty rotten deal!"

"That's all a lie," cried my uncle, "and

only makes a bad matter worse. You have had no proposition from any one, not even myself definitely; and what is more to the point, I doubt if you will get one. I just learned this evening at the courthouse, Jake, that you were borrowing your money on a half interest in your share of the gold, and you told me positively that you had the money in the bank. Now, I cannot afford to have a scalawag in with me on this deal, for I'm playing my last card. You have told me three untruths to-day. I can't trust you."

"Then you won't even give me a quarter share?" begged Jake, earnestly, for he was fast seeing his get-rich-quick scheme slip out of his hands.

"None," said my uncle, quite positively. "I am arranging for these boys to have your share between them. I am certain I can depend upon them."

Jake Henderson rose, took his hat and stalked to the door, then suddenly flaming into a new rage at the very thought of how he had been caught, he shook his fist at Hale and declared: "You boys will never see Colorado if I can help it."

My uncle sprang to the door in one leap,

his great fists clenched. But Jake was gone, and we saw no more of him until we reached Saint Joe two weeks later.

As my uncle came back from the door, my mother hurried to him, a strange, frightened look on her face.

"O Herman," she cried, "what a miserable man! Do you suppose he will really set out to cause you trouble as he threatened to do?"

"O bah!" exclaimed my uncle, in deep disgust. "A man that lies is a coward too, usually. He hasn't nerve enough to fight a pussy cat. We will probably never see him again. He's gone, and I'm glad. Now, mother, what about these boys—what do you say? What do you think of taking them into the company? I had intended to give Jake a share for his services, instead of money, but now I am convinced he is a shyster. I was just testing him out to-night a bit. Of course I would never think of starting on such an undertaking as we have been here proposing with anything save a perfectly congenial company.

"Toleman, what do you think of the new plan? I want you to be perfectly frank

about it, for now is the time to say just what you think. I will respect you the more for it."

"I vote Yes, unanimously," laughed Toleman. "Me and the boys will get on famously. And I'm so blamed glad we got rid of that little skunk without havin' to bury our duds. Jerusalem! but he was mad. Your talking to him was just like taking a miserable sinner up to the pearly gates and discoverin' who you had and dropping him again. He sure was one surprised and disappointed man, but, mark my words, gents, we haven't seen the last of him. He'll get to Colorado if he has to go via Greenland and walk every inch of the way. But he'll be there, mark me that; and don't forget he'll be out for our scalps. I only hope I see him first. I'll teach him a few little lessons."

Uncle Herman laughed, but it was a forced, dry laugh. He turned again uneasily to my mother, for he feared the little episode might have caused her to change her mind about our going. Fortunately, she had the utmost confidence in my uncle, and I was not at all surprised when she said, in her firm gentle way:

"Herman, I think you know what is best, and although it will be very lonely to have you all gone, if you think it wise for the boys to go, I'll not say no. I fully realize that they are both young men now, and that sooner or later they must begin life for themselves. Nothing could give me more joy, Herman, than to know they were getting their first hard knocks under your supervision."

My uncle smiled, and was himself again. He tapped the table with his finger restlessly, as he mentally went over the whole matter for the last time, and then, as if to make his decision final, he said:

"Boys, from to-night we are partners, for better or for worse. Toleman, you and I will have equal shares; and if we get rich, you can pay me back my original investment. We will start in two weeks. I'll begin to have the machinery shipped by rail to Saint Joe at once. We will buy our oxen there, I think, and we will send you on to pick them out and find drivers for our wagons. You are an old stock man, and will do better at the buying than I."

"Then it's 'Pike's Peak or bust,' lads,"

cried Toleman, shaking us each by the hand. "Jerusalem! but we'll make them herds of buffalo hustle when we hit the valley of the Platte. It will seem great to be on the old Oregon Trail again, to hear the shout of teamsters and the yell of savages. Yes, it's a region of Indians and wild beasts, of scorching deserts, shifting sands, whirlwinds of powdered dust and acres of cactus and prairie dogs; but it's God's country all the same, and I'll be glad to be back to it. Good night, all!" and he was gone.

We sat a little while, thinking in silence, and then went to bed to dream of the pathless deserts, illimitable prairies, nameless rivers, and colossal mountains he had told us of until sleep came.

CHAPTER III

A PLOT IN THE NIGHT

THE next two weeks passed very quickly for Hale and me. Every day we were busy with final arrangements, such as the shipping of supplies to Saint Joe, buying machinery, and getting my mother off to the country to visit my sister. We suddenly found ourselves very popular, not to say envied, by our host of boy friends, for we were actually going to Colorado, and were to be part and parcel of a real ox-train. I well remember just how thoroughly interested we were in buying our guns and hunting knives. Each of us had a splendid new rifle of latest design—a gift from Toleman—a pair of thirty-eight pistols, and a heavy pocketknife. Each one of us packed his few simple bits of personal clothing in a stout canvas bag, with our names lettered boldly upon them, while our blankets, each numbered to match our respective wagons, were folded and packed on the wagon seat.

Toleman had already gone ahead to hire the dozen or more drivers that would be necessary, and was fortunate in securing, for the most part, farmers from the Missouri hills who were willing to give their services in turn for the opportunity of the trip to the West. With the help of these men, the heavy machinery and provisions had all been loaded on our new wagons under Toleman's direction, so that all was about in readiness for our start immediately upon our reaching Saint Joe. As we hurried through the main streets of the little Missouri town, already rapidly filled up with all sorts and descriptions of gold-crazed men belonging to the wagon-trains en route to the gold country, I noted that my uncle Herman attracted a great deal of attention. Perhaps it was because of his tremendous body, that was ever as erect as a soldier's. But more likely it was because it had gotten noised about that he was the master of the largest and most extensively equipped wagon-train that had yet put in its appearance preparatory to starting West. Keen merchants sought to sell him goods; many masters of smaller trains sought his advice about this or that

detail; while scores of eager adventurers, posing as miners, mechanics and cooks, pressed him from all sides for employment in one capacity or another.

That evening he called a meeting, at our camp, of every man that was to be a part of our train, including Toleman, Hale, and myself, and talked to us a long time about the necessity of close cooperation, and about the importance of each man doing his own work as well as tending strictly to his own business. The little camp, the big circle of newly painted wagons, the forty head of oxen, the herd of cows and ponies, and last of all the friendly circle of stalwart, bronzed men, made a tremendous impression upon us boys. I can see my uncle yet, as he stood by the blazing fire, his broad-brimmed hat set well back on his head, his high-topped boots, flannel shirt and bandana handkerchief, all looking just as I had seen him after his return from California twelve years before. He addressed us from the fire:

“Men, there are just three things that I want to say to you. Remember them carefully. They are, keep sweet, do your part no matter what the other fellow does, and

be loyal. We will have many a long, weary day before we even reach the Rockies. There will be many lonesome hours, when every man of you will wish himself back home again, snug and well fed in your own cabin. The desert sun will burn and blister you until the very sands will seem to be on fire. We will have wild, stormy nights, when we will be compelled to go to bed wet and hungry, with no sound in our ears save the yelp of hungry wolves and the bellowing of buffalo bulls. We will have days and days, I have no doubt, when our tongues will swell and our mouths smart for want of fresh water. We will have breakdowns, long, lonely night vigils, treacherous bands of Indians, bandits and cattle thieves, until every man with a soul will be tried as never before.

“You see, I have been through one such wild rush as this is to be, and I know just what men suffer. There will be no place for a weakling, or a coward, or an old woman. I want you to withdraw now, before we have gotten under way, if any of you do not fully intend to see the whole show through. Is there a man that wants to with-

draw? If so, it will be entirely satisfactory to me."

He waited a full moment before continuing, but there was no move on the part of a single man. He had captured them, every one, by his own big self.

"Pike's Peak or bust!" cried a jolly, fat driver, who had watched my uncle's every move, listening intently to every word, his face shining with admiration. "I'm with you, Cap, to the bloody end, unless my infernal bread-box plays out on me. I can handle anything ordinarily, but stewed prairie dog or skunk sausage won't go."

"Well, then," continued my uncle, with a hearty laugh, "this will be our plan. I am captain of this little army. When in doubt as to your duty, come to me. Toleman and Hale are to be our official trailers and will supervise the packing, the choosing of camp sites, and have the overseeing of our oxen. They will do the scouting in times of danger, and because Toleman is a crack-shot and will be well mounted, he will supply us with fresh meat whenever it is possible. Bill Sikes is going to act as our official cook, and I warn you now, men, don't make any slighting

remarks about Bill's flapjacks or his biscuits, for I understand Bill is very handy with his fists. I've followed Toleman's advice in choosing a medicine chest. It consists entirely of a gallon of castor oil, and it is to be free to all. We'll let every man be his own doctor. Clayton here," referring to me, "is to be my private secretary, and will have no other duties to perform except keep our daily record and to look after the commissary, until he feels stronger.

"Every driver will feed, water, and harness his own teams of oxen, and I will divide you into squads of four each, to care for the cattle and do the extra camp duty. We will excuse Bill, of course, from any responsibility of feeding or harnessing as long as his chuck does not kill any of us. If it does, Bill Sikes, we'll shoot you at sunrise. Of course, if it does come to a showdown, I can do the cooking myself, for I know how to boil eggs; and as long as we have eggs I'll get on some way. Years ago, while in California, I knew how to bake 'choke-dog,' but a man that's panning gravel in a river-bed sixteen hours a day would have no trouble in digesting most anything. It will be dif-

ferent with you men perched on a wagon seat all day.

"Now, men, good night. I must go back to the city on a little business trip, but remember we start at daylight—for the richest gold country in the world!"

It was but a short way to the busy little city, so we decided to walk. Everywhere were teams of oxen and loaded wagons, and the narrow sidewalks were fairly alive with hurrying, excited men. As we pushed up the street, whom should we see coming down just ahead of us but Jake Henderson, in company with a burly Irishman that Toleman told us he had hired as a driver, but later, because of some heated altercation, growing out of the loading of the engine, he had been compelled to pay the Hibernian off and let him go. Both men were now thoroughly drunk, and were singing loudly some rough mining ditties as they jostled the crowd. Uncle Herman quickly drew us into an open doorway until they should pass. He did not want the scalawags to know that we had seen them, for he was sure that both men were headed straight for our camp. Uncle Herman quickly drew Toleman to one

side and held a conversation with him, with the result that Cy soon left us, for just what destination we did not then know.

"I'm glad we are getting away from here at daylight," said my uncle, after we had completed our little business. "I would certainly hate to get into a squabble with Jake Henderson now. He and that big Irishman, when drunk, make a bad combination, and if they haven't already planned some trouble for us, no doubt they will. I hope we can leave them behind."

An hour later, as we approached our camp, Cy suddenly appeared from out of the darkness, and in an instant we realized that something had gone wrong

"Jerusalem! but that was luck," he breathed. "I caught the scamp right in the very act. The yellow hound! My fingers just itched to dust the landscape with his skinny carcass. 'But,' says I, 'Cy, keep your shirt on a bit yet, and don't go and spill the beans too soon, till you're a bit wise of his intentions.' When I arrived in camp, he and that big Irishman had all the drivers together, and was giving them a great lingo of how you were intendin' to take every

advantage of them all the way out, just as you had taken advantage of Jake already, and strongly advised them to strike before starting, unless you would pay them each a hundred dollars cash bonus before they moved and a like sum upon arriving at the diggin's.

"'Incitin' a rebellion, are you?' says I to myself. 'Well, go to it, Jake, and luck!' 'cause I figured that if a skinny little drunk good-for-nothing like him could stampede our drivers this early in the game, we had better have the celebration while we were still in Missouri, where we could get more men. Well, after he had yapped just about so long, the big Irishman suggested that they capture the train by force; make him captain in your place, rope us all securely in one of the wagons, and go on to the West on their own hook. Finally big Bill Sikes took the floor, and such a waterspout of sarcastic language I never heard before. There never has been no sech an accurate word description of a man made before nor since, as Bill made of old Jake Henderson. I just lay back in the grass and rolled, I was that tickled. Says I to myself, 'Billy, if you can.

flip flapjacks as expertly as you can flip beautiful, becoming adjectives, then we'll be in clover so far as the eating goes.' Gentlemen, it was like a waterfall in flood season, and when he finished there just naturally wasn't anything left to say that was appropriate, for Bill had used up the hull blamed dictionary.

"Jake sort of looked bewildered, like as if some one had suddenly turned a hose of cold water on him. I thought it was all over, when Jake flamed forth and completely lost his head. He had the nerve to threaten that whole herd of Missouri 'mules' with all sorts of threats, of everything from shooting 'em from ambush to poisoning their spring water. Finally the two left, as I supposed, but as I was walking down the row of wagons, well back in the dark, of course, just enjoying my thoughts, I suddenly heard a whispered conversation going on over near the powder wagon. I tell you, right there I smelled trouble. So, laying down in the tall grass, I rolled over and over until I was near enough to hear what was going on. There stood Jake and his Irish friend, and Keats, the driver of Wagon Six, in whose

charge we had put the powder for safe keeping.

“‘I’ll give you fifty dollars in cold cash, and a job as boss driver in my own train,’ I heard Jake say, coolly.

“I waited breathlessly, my eye on the three, for evidently the Missourian was seriously considering the matter.

“‘I’ll do the job for a hundred,’ finally drawled Keats. ‘When does this here wagon-train of your’n start for out yonder?’

“‘In just ten days,’ said Jake, glibly. ‘And mine is going to be the first real train to leave Saint Joe, and what’s more, the first one to arrive at the diggins. Of course the first one in gets pick of claims, and that’s me. But a hundred is too much. Why, I can hire a gang of darkies in Saint Joe to eat Trout’s whole train alive for less than that. All I want is for you to back your powder wagon up against the stamp mill and touch her off. Before he can get another mill here and loaded I’ll be on my way, see? He doesn’t know I’m here yet, and I don’t want him to, either.’

“I chuckled to myself right there, and I says, sort of under my breath, ‘Jake, they

wouldn't own you in Hades, for you're too blamed mean to burn!' Well, the bargain was finally made for seventy-five dollars gold, and Jake and his friend started back toward town, well pleased with their dirty work, agreeing to return before daylight with the money.

"First I was for bumping into Jake at once and settling matters permanent like. Then I changed my mind, 'cause I couldn't handle both him and the Irishman if there was to be any real gun play. I have a much better idea. But let's go and sit down a bit, where I can talk. Some one is liable to see us here, if we aren't careful, and spill the beans altogether."

CHAPTER IV

A MIDNIGHT KIDNAPING

WE were all very eager, of course, to hear just what Cy's scheme was, so after going well back into the meadow, to a clump of trees, we seated ourselves and urged him to go on. I could see that my uncle was very angry, and just a bit impatient that Cy should have let Jake get away. But Cy gave him no chance to say a word.

"Jerusalem! but it will be fun, and it won't do any one any harm, that is, permanently, and it will teach a few folks how to behave. Now, here is my little scheme. We will all go to camp together, just as if nothing had happened, and will prepare for night. The wagons with the stamp mill on them, and the powder wagon, are standing close to each other in the road. We'll hitch onto them and pull them back out of the way, explaining that the road hadn't ought to be blocked up that way all night.

"Then Hale, here, and I will take Sikes—you let him have your mule—and we'll go into town and kidnap Jake. He is probably drinking again, to celebrate his success, and will be easy to find. We'll bring him back here to camp, and smuggle him into that powder wagon without any one knowing he is here, and the Irishman won't be undertaking anything without him. Then we'll invite Keats out into the dark to talk over some matters, gag him and put him in Sikes's wagon till morning. We will tell Jake that he bargained for the little explosion, and that if she's going up, he ought to be on the band wagon. You see, Jake won't know that Keats is tied up, and seeing the powder wagon backed up against the mill, he'll think Keats has everything ready. We will mask ourselves so as to pass off as the teamsters, and we'll have Sikes do the talking, for he can do it so beautiful, and Jake knows Bill was against him. It will be sort of exciting and pleasant-like to sleep on a powder keg for which you have agreed to pay nearly a hundred in hard cash to have exploded before sunrise.

"We will take Jake on with us about three

days' march, and then turn him loose to walk home. It will be a lesson to the rest, and show Jake once for all that he had best tend to his own knitting. What do you say? No telling what Jake will do if we leave him running around here loose. While I'm in Saint Joe, I'll hire another teamster to be here at sunrise, so we'll be all safe if we should have to fire Keats too."

My uncle readily agreed to the plan, and in thirty minutes the three men were on their way back to the little city. It pleased Hale greatly to be a partner with Toleman in this first adventure, as it proved to be only the beginning of a long and varied string of adventures that they were to have together before we reached Denver. I stayed awake just as long as I could, awaiting their return, but finally fell asleep, for the day had been a very strenuous one, and I knew full well that the morrow would be much more so. Hale greeted me in the morning with a knowing wink, and whispered to me:

"O! Clayt, it was fun! He was drunk as a lord and talked something awful. Beat any show I ever saw in my life, and it was all done as neat as a pin. Cy is a perfect

wonder, and his muscles are like steel. Jake is over yonder now, making all sorts of promises and begging for freedom. He is as tame as a kitten, and will eat out of your hand."

It was the first of August, and our whole camp was in a bustle. Some men were busy yoking oxen and hitching them to the wagons with great difficulty, for many of the animals, while big and strong, were young and not yet thoroughly broken. It was hours and hours before our train was finally in motion and headed for Pike's Peak. Toleman, followed closely by Hale, was here, there, and everywhere from one end of the long train to the other, on his pony, while my uncle, who had already been dubbed "Cap" after his little talk at the fire, rode alongside on his stout saddle mule, encouraging here and giving advice there, as the occasion demanded it.

Our first five miles lay out through an open level valley, and everything went fine. But when we reached the bluffs and ravines to the west, the young, unbroken oxen began to balk, and finally absolutely refused to pull their loads up the hill. Consequently, the

better teams rapidly went ahead and by noon were out of sight, while the less fortunate ones, at Toleman's suggestion, had to double up, taking first one wagon up a hill and then another, which was, of course, very slow work, and discouraging to the drivers. Hale was kept busy with the poorly broken oxen on the off side, while the drivers whipped and stormed at those on the other side. Slowly but surely the wagons became separated, until long before dark of our first day we were actually strung out over fully five miles of prairie.

In the early afternoon Toleman chose a camp spot on a small stream of clear water that wandered in and out through a bit of meadow, and ordered the first teams to halt, with the hope that we might have time before dark for the slow teams to catch up. But such was not to be our luck, although the last teams trailed on till darkness closed about them. Worn and weary, the young oxen were unhitched and allowed to feed where they would, while we ate cheese and crackers for our evening lunch, being too tired to hunt wood for fires or to cook food.

As we looked back over our scattered

train, Jake's evil prediction came to mind, and I confess it looked like he might be right, after all. To make matters worse, we had hardly gotten settled for the night when a terrific thunder shower suddenly put in its appearance and insisted on spending the entire night in our immediate locality. Needless to say, everything was soaked to a dismal, soggy state, even our dispositions. We rolled up in our blankets as best we could, and slept under the wagons until the streams of muddy water drove us out.

At daybreak we started in different directions through the wet bushes and waist-high grass that filled every ravine, in search of our scattered oxen. We took time to cook a warm breakfast, however, and all drank quantities of strong coffee, to make up for the sleep we did not get. But when we finally got the train lined up, we discovered that several more or less serious accidents had happened to us, all of which vexed my uncle sorely. Two of our best young cows had fallen into a steep, unguessed gully and had broken their necks. One load of heavy mine machinery had run downhill and upset. One axle, two tongues, and several

yokes were broken, not to mention damaged harness and a number of minor things that needed repairs. My uncle was positively disgusted, and began to wonder if such things were to be a daily occurrence. He was just preparing to go to work on repairs, when Toleman rode up, a very merry twinkle in his eyes.

"What are you going to do, Cap?" he asked.

"Got to make these repairs before we can budge an inch," grumbled my uncle, "and I am about as handy at such things as a bear at a piano."

"Why should you worry over them, when we have a firstclass mechanic riding idly in our powder cart?" laughed Toleman. "I'll go fetch him, and if he does a right good job, and is cheerful about it, we will shorten his sentence a notch. I calculated we'd need the rascal about this morning, and he'll be glad of a little exercise."

Soon Cy returned with Jake, and the repairs were gotten under way, much to the merriment of all the tired and more or less disgruntled drivers. Bill Sikes was on hand too, of course, to make a few suggestions and

incidentally to give Jake a bit of fatherly advice; all of which Jake accepted in an unusually affable manner. But behind all his self-control there was a purpose, you may rest assured, which was not long in showing itself.

Toleman and Hale rode back to town to purchase two additional yoke of oxen, for it was now very evident that some of the younger animals were not going to be able to pull their heavy loads day after day. Jake took advantage of Toleman's absence from the camp, and, after finishing the repairs in a first-class shape, drew my uncle to one side; deliberately apologized for his rash loss of temper at our home, and begged to be allowed to continue with the train to the West, pointing out, as only shrewd Jake knew how to do, just how essential he would be to the ultimate success of our whole undertaking.

"Just tell me, Mr. Trout," he said, in a last earnest appeal, "what are you going to do when you get into the heart of the Indian country and have breakdowns like these? It would mean that you would have to abandon your priceless machinery or forfeit

your scalps. Which is it to be? You will have repairs like these to be made every day of the trip, only there will be many more of them, for wagons won't stay new long on these hot, dry prairies."

My uncle asked for an hour to consider his proposition, hoping Cy would return by that time. But as he did not return, after carefully weighing every element concerned, fully aware of the possible costliness of a favorable decision, he decided in Jake's favor. He warned him, however, in no uncertain way of just what would be his attitude toward him in case Jake should in the slightest way forget his place and agreement.

Jake secretly gloried in his victory, although he kept himself very meek. Instinctively I seemed to realize that I must keep my eyes and ears open, for I could never forget Jake's malignant threats nor the look of savage hatred on his face that night at mother's. It nettled me just a little that my uncle should even consider having him along, knowing what it might mean to Hale and me, but I had already learned in one twenty-four hours that my uncle said little, thought

much, and kept his own council, except when he was angry.

When Toleman returned, he received the news about Jake with apparent unconcern, and even laughed about it a bit. Yet I was certain that I saw his thin lips draw tight about his mouth, and his black eyes come together just a little doubtfully, as my uncle confided to him his apparent good reasons for keeping Jake.

"Cy," he said at length, "Jake is a good friend and a very bad enemy. Every man in camp is onto him now, so that he is not dangerous; and, really, I don't see how we are going to get through without him. You leave him to me, and I'll have him eating out of my hand in a week."

"Jerusalem! I wish you hadn't promised him, Cap," was all Toleman said, but it spoke volumes to me. Hale told me afterward that Cy had come direct to him, as soon as the train was in motion again, and they fell well back to the end of the line, where they could talk without being seen or disturbed.

"'Taint that I think you are not able to care for yourself, lad," he said, by way of

introduction to Hale, "but I haven't navigated these Western cattle ranges all my life without learning a few little points about human nature, and now I'm just going to give you the advantage of my observations. You can always depend on a thoroughbred, remember that, whether he's a six-foot giant or a stub. They always play square and in the open. But when you are dealing with a dunghill breed, you must keep your eye peeled all the time. Do you catch my drift? Well, Jake has poison in his heart for you two boys, and I want you to always be ready for him. When he strikes, it will more than likely be in the dark and in the back. You will need to act quickly, or he is sure to get you. Now, that big horse pistol you have there is all right for hunting elephant and buffalo bulls, but for *skunks* it is too blamed slow. Watch me closely, lad."

In the bat of an eye a small pistol suddenly appeared in Cy's hand. From whence it came, Hale hadn't the slightest idea in the world, but there it was, and there was no mistaking it. Hale just gazed at his friend in unfeigned admiration, without saying a word, then suddenly:

"Do you mean that Jake might attempt to kill me in cold blood?" he asked.

Toleman laughed his merry laugh before he answered.

"Jerusalem! No, lad," he said. "He is far too clever to do anything like that. He will be sure that the shooting is accidental. He may even attempt to only cripple you, so that you would have to be sent home. But this I warn you, night and day you boys must go armed. You see I carry this little gun in my sleeve. It's so much easier to draw—see?" and he snapped the little Derringer in and out with an odd twist, just as if that was all he had been doing for a lifetime.

"He'd get the drop on you every single time from the holster, for he is an expert at that, but he doesn't know this little trick. One of the old Vigilants of forty-nine taught it to me, and it has saved my hide more than once. I have a pair of these. You take this one, and every day when we ride on ahead to locate a camp and water for the night, I will see you practice a bit. It is dead easy when you know how.

"Now, don't worry about him. He won't

attempt any play for days, because he has to make good with your uncle first and win the confidence of these men before he has a chance. Meanwhile we will watch and listen and be getting ready. What's more, lad," and the bronzed young trailer reined in close to the boy beside him, "remember that I'm in on this game too, and he will have to beat us both to win. I've got a weather eye that never sleeps—leastways not when my pard's in danger."

Hale put out his hand and looked into the kindly face of the sun-tanned scout. His heart swelled in spite of himself, and all he could say just then was, "Thanks, Cy." But from that hour on he felt safe even in the presence of Jake when Cy Toleman was around.

CHAPTER V

SURROUNDED BY WOLVES

THE first day's adventures taught us all many things, so that by the third day things were working in a much more systematic manner. All the teams kept near to each other now, so as not to leave a weaker, or perchance disabled, team in the lurch. Our stock was guarded each night by relays of the drivers, some driver being on duty at each side of the herd all night. Each watch was two hours long. In order not to work a serious hardship on any one, all took their turn, save the cook and myself. So as to avoid my position being misunderstood by the drivers, or from being looked upon as a favorite because of my ill health, I purposely volunteered to help the cook do up his pans. This greatly pleased Bill, for it was a back-breaking job for a fat man, at best, and we soon became quite chummy. Often, as I toiled over his greasy pots and kettles, or scrubbed away at his fry pans,

he would chat with me, and I soon learned that he was very shrewd, and at times a true philosopher. Incidentally, I gathered from his talk that he greatly distrusted Jake Henderson and that he was also watching him very closely, for Jake had sworn vengeance on the cook already, for his part in the kidnaping. I decided to tell Bill briefly of Jake's quarrel with my uncle, so that in a way he might understand just our position. I lived to be truly thankful that I had taken him into my confidence, and never once did he betray me.

The third day out our appetites came into their own, and we nearly ate poor Bill out of house and home. It seemed we could not get enough. He declared in deep disgust that he made a thousand flapjacks every morning, and that when it came to hot biscuits and syrup, he had to start two days ahead of time to get enough cooked for one meal. However, each day saw things working a little better, and although we were not making race-horse speed by any means, we were fast leaving the Missouri hills behind, and in due time pulled into Hiawatha, Kansas. This was the last real bit of civili-

zation that we saw. All the rest was typically Western and new. The summer had been a very dry one on all the Western plains, and the flat endless prairies were parched and dusty dry, often resembling a huge desert, except for the meager fringes of green along the water courses. We were in constant terror of prairie fires, and twice narrowly escaped them; once a heavy rain saved our train from destruction, and the other time Toleman saved us by racing into camp, setting a back-fire, and then retreating into the burned area before the big fire reached us. It seemed to me that the odor of burning grass clung to everything about the train for days. Cy told us that the prairie fires were a favorite means used by the Pawnees to stampede stock and horses, but so far we had seen no signs of Indians.

The heat of the sun was so intense that the distant hills seemed to fairly quiver. The iron tires and wagon hardware were blistering to the touch, while the southwest wind blew over us like a blast from a heated furnace. So intense was the heat at midday that the oxen soon began to show it badly. They would pant, loll out their tongues, and

refuse to pull, very often lying down in their yokes. This tried the patience of every teamster to the breaking point. Often, at Cy's suggestion, we traveled only in the early morning and into the long twilight, resting through the heat of the day, then sometimes traveling by night again, when the moon gave enough light. Cy and Hale were always off bright and early each morning, in search of water holes and shade, both of which seemed to be growing rapidly scarcer. Many times they did not return all day long, but I always knew that their hours were not being wasted, and often imagined I saw them practicing with the little derringers to see who could get the drop first.

As the good water holes became scarcer the hungry prairie wolves became more plentiful. Many nights they surrounded our entire circle of wagons. Twice Toleman just averted a stampede among our cattle and oxen, which often became excited over the fierce yelping about them. Sometimes the wolves became so bold that they would come right in among us as we slept, hunting for discarded scraps from our evening meal,

often frightening us badly. If any one stirred, the green eyes would silently slink away to a safe distance. Sometimes the peaceful night would be shattered by a series of piercing howls; then every driver would reach for his gun and swear vengeance.

One of these very hot days was just ending, and we were harnessing for a night march, when one of our best and strongest oxen lay down in her yoke and refused to rise. Apparently, she was sick from the heat. In order that the train might not be delayed, my uncle asked Hale to stay by her for a few hours, to let her rest, and then in the cool of the evening to drive her on. He had his pony, and could easily overtake us before we should camp.

Hale gladly dropped out, but took the precaution to take a generous supply of ammunition with him, and his rifle. As night came on the old ox grew weaker instead of stronger, until Hale realized it would never walk again. Yet he disliked leaving the poor helpless thing to the savage fangs of the wolf pack. Several times the idea came to him to shoot the critter and ride back. But the old ox seemed to fully realize its situa-

tion, and watched the boy's every move with an almost pleading look not to be left alone on the desert. "You have pulled a heavy load these many days, and I won't forsake you," cried the boy. "Let the pack come; we'll give them plenty of hot medicine."

Soon after dark the wolves seemed to realize they were about to have a feast, and so came early in anticipation. First there were only a dozen, and then twenty, and by the time it was really dusk, Hale could see a solid circle of dark bodies about him, all seated on their haunches expectantly. Several times he shot into them just to see the black forms scamper and to hear them yelp, but soon he decided this was a foolish waste of ammunition, and that from indications he was liable to need every shell he had before morning. He tied his pony to a stout clump of Spanish bayonet, and then settled down for what he soon realized was to be an all-night vigil. The howls grew more frequent now, and took on a fiercer note of impatience, as much as to say, "What is one puny boy, that he should keep a wolf pack from its legitimate prey!" Soon the howling and circle of firelike eyes became monotonous,

and Hale lay down a bit by the old sick ox. Three times he did this, and the third time the wolves, emboldened by the stillness, sneaked up close and broke out in piercing yelps, only to instantly vanish when he would again move about.

So the long night wore slowly on. Never before had Hale been so lonesome or so far away from protection. He laughed a grim little laugh as he thought what his dear mother would think if she knew just where he was at that hour—completely surrounded by a pack of blood-thirsty wolves, on a bleak and barren plain, miles from anywhere. Yet he was not afraid. He deliberately counted his ammunition. He had eleven charges for his rifle and nine for his pistol, that was all. He was sorry now that he had wasted a good half dozen shots just at dusk, for in case the pack should charge, he must make every single shot a fatal one, and he was sure he could do just that thing at such close range.

The preceding days had been very strenuous ones, and Hale was tired out. His head would nod now, in spite of himself, and twice toward midnight he fell asleep for just a moment. The last time he slept a long

time, when suddenly he felt the old ox make a violent lurch. He jumped to his feet, rifle in hand, for not fifty feet away from him was the circle of green eyes, with one pair slightly in advance of all the others. As he got to his feet, they howled a blood-curdling howl and sprang forward. Deliberately Hale took aim and shot. The foremost wolf toppled over, but almost instantly another was in its place. He shot again and again, now each shot laying low a leader, but there was no stopping them now, for they had smelled blood. Why hadn't he been thoughtful enough to gather a pile of buffalo chips before dark and build him a fire? He knew full well there was ample protection behind such a fire, even from a hungry wolf pack. Cy had often told him so.

He realized that his situation was rapidly growing desperate, for while he was picking off a leader in front of him, another would nearly reach him. Of course it was the ox meat they were after, but how was he to separate himself from the ox so that he would not actually share in the carnage? That was what bothered him most. His shots were now reduced to two shells for

his rifle and three for his pistol. They were all that stood between him and certain death. It was then for the first time in several hours that he thought of his pony, and turned to it as a possible escape, but to his amazement he could not distinguish him in the dark. He worked his way over to the shrub where he had tied the animal, but even that was gone—pulled out by the roots. His pony had bolted while he slept!

Fortunately for Hale, that was just what had happened; and it was his riderless pony racing into camp an hour later that probably saved his life. In a second my uncle, mounted on his wiry mule, and Toleman on his wild Western mustang, were racing over back tracks to where the ox and Hale had been left. From time to time they heard shots, and Toleman only too well knew what sort of a drama was going on yonder in the desert blackness.

“Hope the boy doesn’t shoot away all his ammunition before we get there,” he breathed, as he urged his horse on faster. “Shooting wolves on these prairies is like trying to exterminate mosquitoes. When you get done with a killing there are more

present than before you begun. I 'low as how that ox has died and those blood-thirsty scavengers are bound to have fresh meat before morning. I hope he built a fire."

"Likely he did not," muttered the Captain, "for he only expected to stay a couple of hours. I wonder why he did not leave at dark."

"The lad would not leave the old ox if she was still alive, and I'm thinking that he probably dozed off to sleep," said Cy, "or else his horse would never have gotten away from him. The boy is a bit soft yet, and was so tired all day that he could hardly keep in his saddle."

The Captain hurried his mule on with renewed vigor, as he muttered bitterly, "I ought to have known better than to send that lad on such an errand. If anything happens to him on this trip, I can never again face his mother."

"He ain't dead yet, by a jugful!" cheerily called Cy. "There, hear that shot? He is busy picking off the leaders, one at a time, as they get into close range. I've done the same thing many a time. In ten minutes we'll be alongside."

Ping! sang a rifle bullet just to their right. Suddenly Toleman pulled his pistol and fired three shots in rapid succession—it was the agreed signal between him and Hale. Three minutes later the two men dashed into the circle of yelping, howling wolves, and found Hale, a very much excited boy, standing erect on the rump of the big ox, his rifle at his feet and his pistol in his right hand. He was making his last stand.

“Jerusalem!” called Toleman, as he slid from his lathered, heaving horse. “What you up to, lad? Where is your fire?”

Hale was never so glad to see human forms, or hear voices, before, for he had been certain, less than a quarter of an hour before that his part in the gold expedition was about over.

“Eleven scalps isn’t so bad for a tender-foot,” said Toleman, as he dragged the dead wolves in, one at a time, to the side of the old ox. The circle had withdrawn a bit to see what this new interference with their midnight meal meant, before charging in upon it again.

“Quick! Let’s get out of here!” called Toleman. “Climb on behind, lad, and let’s

let 'em have that meat. They will forget all about us in a few moments."

They reached camp about three in the morning, and from that time on I observed that most of the drivers treated Hale with more respect than had been their habit, while Cy never lost an opportunity to comment upon what was bound to happen to *any* animal, wild or human, that insisted on picking a scrap with a cocky little game bird like Hale. Of course the real significance of such remarks was always lost on all save Sikes, but to Bill they were moments of pure delight, to be chuckled over all the next day.

CHAPTER VI

OUR FIRST SIGHT OF INDIANS

TO say the least, our progress was discouraging. So much so that secretly some of us began to doubt a bit if we would ever really see the Rockies at all. The terrific heat continued without a break, and every day the wagon seemed heavier. We were averaging but a mile an hour. It was little wonder, then, that it was two long weeks before we reached the Big Blue River at Marysville. This was a small settlement on the very edge of civilization, situated on the main branch of the old Oregon Trail which starts due north at Westport, Missouri, and then passes Fort Leavenworth. As I remember it, it consisted mostly of a disorderly cluster of saloons, a few little stores, and a number of raw ranches.

The inhabitants had a very bad reputation; in fact, were supposed to be mostly outlaws, blacklegs, and stock thieves. Consequently, we kept very close watch on our

train night and day, and even detoured considerably to keep from camping too near to them. Even with this precaution we came near having serious trouble. One of our drivers, unfortunately, met old friends here, and they succeeded in persuading him that he was on a wild goose chase, and to go no further with us. So we found ourselves again fortunate in having the extra man that Toleman had brought from Saint Joe supposedly to take the place of the driver on Number Six.

That evening, much against my uncle's wishes, a half dozen of the Missourians walked into the village to celebrate, and as a result of drinking too much "40 rod" we were compelled to start on the morrow short two more drivers. It at once became necessary for Jake to drive a team, which circumstance greatly pleased him, for it made him just that much more indispensable to my uncle. I offered to drive the other wagon, as I was fast becoming strong and vigorous with the fresh air, strenuous work, and simple fare, so that we were not so badly handicapped after all.

Our course now, as we supposed, lay for

several days along the bank of the Little Blue leading directly to Fort Kearney on the Platte. Time after time we were compelled to make great circling detours to avoid the deep, sandy washes that were everywhere. Invariably we had to come back to the river for our camp at night. Upon one such occasion we were compelled to make a forced march of at least twenty miles, taking us all day and most of the following night to find water. This trip nearly exhausted our strength and brought forth much grumbling from the men. It was very evident that our whole train was fast getting worn and weary. Many of the oxen had developed sore feet, and many of the cattle had an infection of the eyes, no doubt due to the dry heat and the flies. Every man had lost his appetite, because of the everlasting sameness of the menu and the bitter water that we were compelled to drink. Cheek bones were fast beginning to show, and faded, ragged clothes to hang more loosely on the sun-browned, drooping figures.

What, then, was our joy when one day Toleman and Hale, while scouting for water

holes, sighted a lone buffalo wandering in solitude over the plains. They took up the chase, and after an hour's racing in the broiling sun succeeded in killing the great brute. It was now Bill Sikes's turn to become popular. Accordingly, he whetted his knives and strode forth to butcher the carcass, at which job he proved to be an artist. The animal was old and tough, but notwithstanding that, the tongue and tenderloins were relished greatly, after having dined on salt side and beans for three solid weeks.

"The best part of this little party," commented Toleman, "is that this old fellow is just an indication that we'll soon be where they are so thick you can't see the end of the herd; and then, boys, we'll have buffalo veal and porterhouse steaks three times a day. We'll make it a real celebration, for there will be regular seas of them—restless, brown seas of humped, shaggy backs and fiercely tossing heads. They will give us plenty of excitement you may be sure, for with them there will be deer, antelope, great flocks of geese, and now and then a flock of brown turkeys."

"And perhaps a bear or two," suggested Hale in mock earnestness.

"O yes," laughed Cy. "No fooling, boys. We are liable to scare up a grizzly any day now, for they are as fond of fresh buffalo as the rest of us."

We were destined to have another excitement first, however, for early the very next morning Toleman declared he saw horsemen to the West, and strongly suspected that they were Indians, although it would be at least a week before we would be into the regular Sioux country. Accordingly, he and Hale rode off, their rifles across their saddles, to "read the prairies," as Cy called it. Before starting, however, Toleman told my uncle to keep the train in close formation, and warned every driver under no circumstances to shoot. Such hideous tales of Indian atrocities had filtered back to Missouri by returning prospectors and hunters that every Missourian felt duty bound to shoot every Indian that in any way crossed his path. No doubt this very ignorant prejudice was the direct cause of many bloody battles in the years of '60 to '65 that could just as easily have been avoided if every

train had been under the careful supervision of a master plainsman like Cy Toleman.

In an hour the scouts returned, very much excited, and reported a big band of Pawnees in full war paint, evidently scouting the plains for some lost trail. Cy was of the opinion, however, that this was simply a blind to give them time to look us over and see what we were going to do.

"The Pawnees and Sioux are hated enemies," explained Cy, "and there are none of the redskins that are so treacherous as the Sioux."

They circled nearer and nearer, staying well together, and finally the tawny chief, with his sable braids falling each side of his painted face, gay in the headdress of dyed eagle plumes, his buckskin shirt jeweled with blue beads and elks' teeth, advanced with his hands extended. Cy rode forth likewise, and parleyed with him. After a time the chief rode back to his band, and we saw no more of them that day. We were thoroughly thankful, for we had troubles enough of our own. The waters of the Little Blue were gradually growing less and less. Just about noon we came to the very last stagnant pools.

I well remember that these were so full of frogs and snakes that the men refused to drink at all. The thirsty cattle did not seem to mind, and paid no attention to the countless tadpoles or the thick brown scum that clung to the edge of every pool. We took several pails of it, set them in one of the wagons to settle, and at supper that night boiled it, skimmed off the top, and made strong coffee from it. The odor of mud clung tenaciously, however, and made most of us sick.

Our situation suddenly became very serious, for with bands of prowling Pawnees on one hand and no water on the other, we were in danger of total extermination. We finally held a council of war, but it resulted in nothing constructive. Several of the drivers were sick, and made no bones about grumbling, suggesting that if we had had a real guide, instead of a loquacious happy-go-lucky cow puncher, we would be farther along than we were, and in better condition; just as if poor Cy, or any other man, was able to make poor trails into roads or heavy loads light by a change in disposition.

I at once recognized the origin of the

trouble. Jake had begun his fiendish work of sowing seed of rebellion, discontent, and discord. I thought I would mention my suspicion to my uncle, but on second thought I decided not to, as he had grown tired of the petty complaints and just a bit touchy on all points relative to Jake. I thought sometimes during those trying days of discouragement that he was just a bit disappointed himself in Cy, for we had struck such bad country and practically no roads at all for days. I talked with Sikes about it, and was not surprised to find that he had the answer, as he most always did.

“Don’t you for a second blame Cy,” he said with some feeling. “If it wasn’t for him we would, like as not, be dying right now in some old dry sump-hole, everlastingly lost. You remember Cy urged and advised the longer, safer route from Fort Leavenworth to the Platte, but the Captain was anxious to save the extra week of time, so took the short cut, and here we are. In a wet season this route wouldn’t be so bad, for there would be both grass and water. But it’s a dry season, and we must take our medicine. It’s that scoundrel Jake that is

causin' this discontent, and not heat, poor water, nor bad roads. Sir, I'm dead cock sure of it."

Cy was not altogether unaware of this feeling toward him, but, true scout that he was, held his peace while hour after hour, with Hale close at his side, they scoured the country for water and the trail that led to the Fort. They too carried water bags tied to their saddles, scanned the prairie closely, but said very little.

That night, for the first time, we camped absolutely dry, and the discontent was much more apparent, for every man wanted water, and wanted it badly. At the fire the talk became openly rebellious, and I began to fear trouble. My uncle said very little, and I noted that before dark Cy and Hale re-saddled their horses. I felt uneasy in spite of myself, but could do absolutely nothing but wait, and keep my eye on Jake.

CHAPTER VII

AVERTING A MUTINY

IT had been dark an hour when my uncle, with no apparent destination, picked up his rifle and left the fire to walk alone in the darkness. Unfortunately, it gave Jake just the opportunity that he had been craving, and with a triumphant leer and a knowing wink or two at Keats, the driver of Number Six, he began to lead up to the subject of a revolt, getting two men to do most of the talking and merely assenting to their opinions himself.

Toleman and Hale had left early in one last effort to run down a faint trail Cy had discovered just before supper, so that Bill and I were the only two left, and were, of course, in a decided minority. I believe now that Jake realized perfectly, from studying his crude road map, just about where we were, and knew that it was just a matter of a few days until we should come to Fort Kearney. He also knew that at this point

we would strike the main route from the States to the mountains and California. Right now was his time to act if he was to succeed at all in breaking up our train. He full well knew that at the junction we would find many other wagon trains going both East and West, and that if he could stir up enough discontent, many, or perhaps all, of our men would turn back to the East, while, if worst came to worst, he would have no trouble in joining himself to some other Westbound train as a mechanic. Victory was at last within his grasp, and it was worth all he had gone through to have his way at last. He was certain that by careful manipulating he could disrupt our party before another night. It was evident that at least half of the drivers were solid on his side, while three others were yet on the fence. I could not understand why my uncle did not deal more harshly with them all, but it was evident that he too had lost spirit.

"I wouldn't go through another four weeks like this for all the gold in Colorado," complained one. (I noted it was Keats who was speaking.)

"Nor I, for all that's in California added

to it," growled another. "It's me for old Missouri just as soon as we hit the main road, if I have to walk all the way back."

"O bah!" I cried, unable to hold my tongue any longer. "Some of you would sell your soul for *seventy-five dollars*, so what is the use of your talking about what you would do for all the gold in Colorado? I wouldn't trust many of you with even a baby's bank of pennies."

Perhaps it was very unwise for me to let them know that we had all the facts of the powder deal with Jake, but at any rate it made me feel better. Keats glared at me sullenly, and talked on to the man next him in an undertone, saying:

"This is our chance, men. Let's take things into our own hands. It's life or death with me now, for I don't believe Cy Toleman has any idea where he is going."

"I'm getting heartily tired of salt side and sinkers, too," whined Jake. "Why can't we have more food? That commissary wagon is full of better grub that is being saved until after the Captain is through with us. Gents, I move we petition the Cap for more and better rations—anything we want, in

fact, and if he refuses, we'll help ourselves for once. What do you say? I told you before we started that we wouldn't get a half dozen square meals all the way out."

The next thing I knew, Bill Sikes raised his huge bulk to his feet, his hands twitching nervously the while, as if anxious to be at some imaginary enemy. Instead of his usual flow of piercing sarcastic invective, he simply laughed. It was not a merry laugh to hear, but it was a laugh, and it did the trick nicely.

"Yew Yorkshire razor-backs," he cried, "eat! eat! Why, dad burn your copper hides, yew ain't cleaned up the grub that has been set before yew for more than a week past. Eat! Why, yew pack of whining, belly-aching coyotes, why don't yew mutiny? I dare yew! Why, there ain't a man among yew that can boil water. Every one of yew would starve in a week with all the raw provisions in creation piled up in your camp.

"Why, a drove of common Missouri mules has more gray matter than yew. Yew sit around here in the sun all day like a lot of pet snakes, expecting Providence to take yew to Colorado, and letting that skinny

little yap over yonder do all your thinking for yew. I'd just about as leave live with a pack of polecats as to associate much longer with a pack of hounds that lick their master's hands when he's a lookin' and then whine and bite when he's gone." Then, turning to Jake, he shouted almost fiercely:

"Jake Henderson, yew are hungry, be yew? Well, derved if I don't feed yew. Do yew hear me? I'm going to feed yew till you're full. Clayton, go fetch me that four-quart crock of prunes and one of them warm Johnny cakes. Boys, he's got to eat. What do yew say? Eat till he's plumb full for once—*full*; do yew hear me?"

Bill's suggestion struck just the right chord with the drivers, for they were yearning for a bit of relaxation and excitement of some kind to break the dead monotony of oxen and wagons and hot, sun-baked prairies. Jake insisted that he could not eat prunes, that his stomach resented their flavor. But Bill was obdurate. Prunes it was to be. So I brought the great crock, set it on the ground, and put a huge new Johnny cake beside it, then waited to see the fun.

"Wish I knew where the Captain kept his

castor oil," observed Bill. "I'd fix 'em so they wouldn't hurt yew none, Jake."

Jake made a break for liberty, but two of the younger drivers captured him and promptly brought him back. They did not mean to be cheated out of their fun like that. Jake was compelled to sit in the circle, the prune crock between his legs, a hunk of corn bread in one hand and a tin soup-spoon in the other, and then eat.

Several times he tried to pass the matter off as a joke, and explain to Bill that he was not complaining any of *his* cooking, but merely of the variety of the food. Twice he attempted to rise after having eaten considerable of the sauce and corn bread, but both times Bill brought him back to his seat with the order to "Eat! Eat! you skinny little runt! Prunes will put meat onto your spare ribs."

Jake at last exploded, and cursed Bill as only Jake Henderson could. But Bill only laughed, and then, quietly, without a bit of stir, he produced a little pistol from somewhere—no one was at all certain from just where—and pointing it straight at the cringing form of Jake, he thundered:

"Eat every last prune! Do yew hear me? I'm goin' to feed yew well for once, even if prunes are a mighty big luxury out here in this God-forsaken country."

Jake raged and swore till his little weazened face was scarlet, while the prune juice trickled down through his dirty whiskers in rivulets.

"I'll kill you for this!" raged Jake. "I warn you now, Bill Sikes, you are a dead man."

Everybody laughed, till I thought some of them would burst, all save the driver of Number Six, and he sat with disgust on every feature. I knew full well he was a coward, or he would have championed Jake's cause there and then.

Jake was just finishing the last drop of juice when suddenly there came a wild clatter of hoofs, and Toleman, with Hale at his side, dashed into camp, a bag of cold water hanging to each saddle horn.

"Drink, gents," he said, cheerfully. "It's really the first wet water I've had for a week. It's as clear as crystal, and what's more, there is oceans of it. To-morrow we hit the main route of the Oregon Trail and the

Platte, and we have saved at least six days by our cut-off."

Every man again became human, and began to chat as they had weeks before. Some were even joyous as they drank deeply from the bag. Jake declined to drink, and I, for one, did not wonder at it, for just where a little man like Jake could have put that crock of prunes I did not know.

"Hurrray for the mighty Platte!" shouted first one, and then they all joined, save Keats. The second hour of danger was past! Jake had lost again. There would be no mutiny, and Cy was a royal good fellow after all. Six days ahead of schedule, and that meant gold. Jake just scowled, and I full well knew that already he was planning his revenge. Bill had broken the camel's back, so to speak, and I was sure that his doom must be sealed, and yet I felt sure Bill would be able to take care of himself.

Before daylight the next morning all the oxen were yoked and hitched. We began a second forced march to water, only this time we knew for a certainty that it was actually there, and it helped mightily. The sun rose early, and seemed determined to thwart our

plan if possible. I'm sure it was a hundred in the sun, and not a sign of shade or a bit of air. We ignored, for the time being, our rule of close formation, and let the strong teams go ahead. Consequently, long before noon the teams were badly separated, and every driver just unhitched where he was, to let the oxen browse and rest. Hale rode on the one side of the long line back and forth continually, while Toleman rode the other side, keeping a sharp lookout for Indians, while my uncle went on ahead to locate the best camp spot he could find along the river. It was fully three miles from the lead wagon to our last ox team, yet we felt safe, being so near to the Fort. Toward the middle of the afternoon my uncle reappeared, and I knew from the way he rode that he had been successful in finding a good spot.

"I saw the stars and stripes," he cried. "We have reached Fort Kearney."

"Thank God!" I answered.

The word was passed on down the line to every teamster, and it certainly was like food to the famishing. Even the oxen seemed to smell water and took a new brace.

We camped just beyond the Fort, on the bank of the river, and every member of our party fairly wallowed in the clear running waters that evening.

We decided to rest here two full days, so as to overhaul our wagons, rest the tired oxen, and tend to our letters, for we found much mail awaiting us that had come on by Pony Express. It was from this mail that we learned that the bank where the entire balance of my uncle's funds were on deposit had failed, so that our present undertaking was all that stood between us and absolute ruin. I remember that he just smiled a grim smile, however, and said:

"Well, there is a great plenty more of the stuff in the hills of Colorado, and with luck and another moon we'll be digging it out."

Several of our drivers made straight for the little saloon, "to wash the alkali dust out of their throats," as they explained, and were soon drunk, with other goldseekers. Among them, of course, were Jake and the driver of Number Six. He had never been sober for so long a time before in all his life, and so celebrated to the limit. My uncle begged them not to go, but they went in spite of him.

As a result, the much needed repairs had to wait.

My uncle was so disgusted over the delay that he finally saddled his mule and went to the Fort. There he found Jake entertaining a bunch of wags, all of whom were hopeless, and soon left the place, disgusted. He had the good fortune to meet up, however, with a tall Down-East Yankee, who had been forced to lay over on account of a slight sunstroke. He proved to be a blacksmith, a humorist, and a sage, as we all discovered soon after his arrival in camp, for my uncle had hired him to take Jake's place for the balance of the trip, and to set up our mill at the other end. The break had come, and we knew it would be final. We did not see Jake again until we reached the gold fields, although many faster trains, drawn by horses and mules, passed us nearly every day. From the time Jake left us, or rather, we left him, there was a new spirit among the drivers. We made better progress, and everybody was better satisfied. Our new friend, Wilson, proved to be a genius in disguise, and soon we had a folding table rigged to the rear of the grub wagon to eat

from, a crude table and chair in my wagon for my books and accounts, and a dozen other little improvements about the wagons and harness.

Bill and Red (for we promptly dubbed him "Red," regardless of the fact that he owned less than two dozen straggling hairs on the back of his head) soon became fast friends, and spent all their leisure time discussing the slavery question, that was already a live issue in the States. Bill's sympathies were strongly with the South, while Red was a red-hot abolitionist, so we had plenty of heated arguments and much amusement as well.

CHAPTER VIII

BUFFALO BY THE MILLION

OUR course now lay along the south side of the Platte all the way into Denver. The grass was much better, and the roads, being greatly traveled, were in fairly good shape. The Platte valley is a broad, gravelly bottom extending hundreds of miles from old Fort Kearney, and is hemmed in on both sides by low, rounding bluffs. From these, the plains run away in endless tablelands.

A few days' travel down the valley brought us into the buffalo country, and we began to see small herds in the distance, but always too far away for chase. However, we knew it would only be a matter of days till we would have the fresh meat we so sorely needed. It fell to Hale to actually usher in the change of diet. He was riding through a belt of cottonwoods and willows, skirting the river one morning, in search of uncle's saddle mule, when suddenly he came upon a buffalo cow and a calf grazing

in the bushes. He circled so as to get a shot from the rear, but in so doing frightened the animal to such an extent that she broke for the tableland, followed by her calf. Instantly he gave chase, and soon was within shooting distance. His first shot went completely wild, but the second lodged in the shoulder. Suddenly the great animal wheeled and charged, causing the little pony to side step so quickly that Hale nearly left the saddle. In "grabbing leather" he dropped his rifle and had to depend entirely on his pistol, which he used with good success, and soon both cow and calf were dead. As Bill served up the sizzling hot steaks that evening he commented that Jake should be present to enjoy the "embellished menu," which joke all enjoyed exceedingly.

The next day we arrived at an adobe ranch house, occupied by a stalwart man and his young son. The masterful way the small lad could handle his pinto pony and swing his lariat completely captured Toleman, and we could hardly get him past the ranch.

"Have you seen the big herd yet?" asked the young cowboy.

"Not yet, son," replied Cy. "How far to

the first rank? I suppose the valley is full of them already—humps, horns, and all?”

“Sure!” said the boy, carelessly. “There are about a million of them. They stampeded past here a few nights ago, and it took most all night for them to pass. We kept a fire burning to keep them from running us down. The bulls were savage, and many calves were tramped to death. The wolves have been feasting ever since.”

“A million of them?” I said, incredulously. “That could not possibly be!”

Cy just laughed. “You’ll see more buffalo in a few days than you ever could imagine were in the world,” he said to me, with a friendly wave of his big hat to the lad. “That’s the stuff the new West is made of, Clayton. He is a thoroughbred, that lad, and will be the father of a new generation.”

Sure enough, the next day we passed a dozen or more small herds of from twenty to a hundred animals in number and found every watering place muddied and dirty. That evening we camped at the edge of the big herd that extended some seventy-five miles to the West as far as the eye could reach, like a heavy growth of young spruce.

Of course the herd was not solid, but when one bunch moved they all did. I afterward learned that usually the cows and calves stayed bunched pretty well to the center, with a stout bodyguard of bulls completely around them for protection.

"Where ever did they all come from?" I asked Cy, as we sat by the fire that evening.

"O, they probably started far up in the Arkansas valley in the spring, and have just now hit the Platte. They come for water and the grass, and then there is protection in their great numbers against the vast hordes of wolves that harass the cows and kill the calves. When once cold weather comes again, and the big herd splits up, there will be thousands upon thousands of whitening carcasses dotting the valley."

The first watch on the cattle that night fell to Toleman and one of the drivers. They came in at the end of their watch and reported that the oxen were quite uneasy and that it looked much like storm, suggesting to my uncle that the wagons be drawn into a great circle and that the oxen and cattle be corraled inside for safe keeping. The Captain thought there would be no trouble,

as the buffalo herd was at least three to five miles away, and so we retired for the night.

Hale and Red Williams were the second watch, and I noted that they left the fire a bit reluctantly. As it grew darker, the wolves began to howl in all directions, and soon the great bulls of the herd began to bellow back their defiance, until the heavens were fairly rent with wild pandemonium. The cold chills ran up and down every man's back, and it was very evident that there was to be little sleep in camp that night. My uncle finally grew quite uneasy, and acknowledged that he had made a big mistake in not following out Cy's advice about the cattle. Toleman said nothing more, but I noted his pony stood saddled just the same and tied to a wagon wheel near his bunk. By and by uncle brought his mule and tied him alongside, then we began to realize that they were expecting trouble.

"A fellow would need the whole United States artillery to fight that bunch of bulls," observed Bill. "I, for one, wish we were on the other side of this river till morning. I wouldn't care to be mixed up in a stampede with that herd."

Finally the Captain and Toleman mounted and rode out toward our stock, to see just how things were going.

"They are scattering," said Cy. "We better call the men out at once and round up what we can and tie them fast, for if they ever get into that herd of buffalo they are gone. A needle in a haystack would be in plain sight compared to them."

The Captain agreed, and all hands were called out, but already the oxen had strayed far. We succeeded in getting in less than half of them. Hale and Red went farther out and prepared to keep a watch, but agreed to stay together as a matter of safety. Once Hale was positive that two horsemen passed him to the left, but could not distinguish a single detail. Far away to the north he saw a tiny light twinkle, but supposed it to be another outfit ahead of them, and gave it little further thought.

With the first gray of dawn they returned to camp to snatch a bit of rest while the rest of us should hunt up the strayed cattle and do the harnessing. Some of the animals had gone up stream, some down, and some had wandered a mile out toward the great black

herd. We found a few asleep in the tall grass and bushes. Two old oxen were completely mired in the quicksands, and only after hours of labor under the expert direction of Cy were we able to save them at all. Two hours before noon all the animals had been found, save two teams of our best oxen, and search as we might we could not find them. When Hale and Red awoke we told them of our plight, and instantly Hale remembered that he had seen two horsemen the night before, and exclaimed: "Those men were cattle thieves. O, why didn't I pot them when I had a chance! It never occurred to me what they were doing."

"Jake and his friends again," suggested Bill. But my uncle only laughed at him, for Jake, as he supposed, had no horses, or money to buy them with, either, as far as that was concerned.

"It couldn't possibly have been Jake, Bill," my uncle replied, "for he is doubtless still drunk at the Fort. Anyway, he is too big a coward to take any chances at cattle thieving, for they hang them in this country for that offense—often without a trial."

"I'm going to find those oxen if it takes

till Christmas," said Toleman, starting to saddle his horse.

"And I'm going with you!" cried Hale, "for if they were really stolen, it was my fault."

Accordingly, the rest of us made a start, while Toleman and Hale loaded their cart-ridge belts and set off on the hunt.

"Have you any gold coin, Captain?" said Toleman, when he was ready to go.

"I have just fifty dollars to my name," my uncle replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Better give it to me. I may need it," replied Cy. "Two or three days' time is more valuable to us just now than those fifty dollars, I judge. You see, I may get a chance to *buy* them pesky oxen back again before night. You can't tell in this country."

He winked knowingly. My uncle gave him the coin, and the two set out down the valley. After riding an hour or so, and closely observing every track, Toleman swung to the right and headed for a great clump of cottonwood that stood in a draw away from the river.

"There is a ranch over there, I think," he said to Hale, "and it may be that our oxen

were out hunting for a night's lodging. We'll just take a look anyway." So together they rode up the lane leading to the corral.

"Jerusalem!" cried Cy. "There they are, every mother's son of them! and eating hay! Now, lad, let me do the talking, and you get your little derringer well set up your sleeve, 'cause I'm liable to have an altercation with this ranchman. If he gets gay, and I give you the wink, cover him. We have got to get those oxen—peaceably if we can, of course; but if not that way, then some other."

Just then the rancher, seeing the riders coming, put in his appearance.

"Huntin' something, gents?" he asked, friendly like.

"Nope—already found what we were hunting for," laughed Cy. "Those pesky critters (indicating our oxen) smelled that hay of your'n some miles, pardner. I'll be derved if they didn't." He eyed the old man very closely.

"You don't mean to suggest that those oxen are your'n, do you?" said the rancher, in great surprise. Then, without a bit of urging on our part, he told us all he knew.

"Two tough looking fellers brought them

here last night. It was considerably after dark, and they explained that they had had a serious breakdown and was abandoning one of their heavy wagons. Not knowing what to do with the two extra teams of oxen, and seeing our light and supposing it was a ranch, they decided to leave them with me until they returned in the spring, 'lowing as how I'd be able to make good use of them if they didn't cost me anything. We made a bargain, and if they never returned, the critters were to belong to me. It all seemed fair enough, so I agreed. The poor duffers looked about worn out and near desperate."

"What did they look like?" said Cy kindly.

The old rancher began to describe them, and before he was half through, I cried, "Jake Henderson and Keats!"

"Exactly!" said Toleman. "But your uncle will never believe it. Those two men have gotten hold of horses—stolen them, probably, at the Fort—and are hurrying to the gold country, living by their wits." Then turning to the rancher, he said:

"Those two scoundrels were cattle thieves, and would give anything to wreck our train. I tell you, good and plenty, if such business

keeps on, these danged wolves are going to have a new kind of meat for supper one of these nights, and I'm going to feed 'em. We are much obliged to you, sir, for caring for these critters, and here is a little practical appreciation." He slipped a ten-dollar gold coin into the rancher's hand. "Just you tell them gents, if they ever return, which isn't at all likely, that Cy Toleman, of Cross-Bar-X, is on their trail, and that he will personally settle for this piece of business."

The old man swung wide the gate and drove the oxen out. After having a cooling drink from the rancher's spring, the two started back to camp, driving the animals before them. They reached us just at dusk, and we were certainly glad to see them come, for delays were maddening now, with team after team passing us every day.

That night the big herd came closer than before, and gave us much anxiety, for there seemed to be no way to avoid them. They were everywhere. They stretched away in what seemed to be endless herds. We drew our wagons into a great circle and herded our cattle inside. They did not rest well or feed good, but there seemed to be nothing

else for us to do. We kept a close guard over our train all the night, but saw nothing or heard nothing save the howl of wolves and the bellowing of enraged buffalo bulls.

The next day the great herd drew closer to our line of march, and at noon we were compelled to wait several hours for them to get out of our way. Sometimes a small herd would get frightened at one of our rattling, jolting wagons, and would start on a run that soon became a wild stampede, the hindermost animals following those before them, and in their blind fury crowding forward with such irresistible force that the leaders could not stop if they would. Often during the next few days the drivers, from their seats, would pepper the animals with bullets. Several times when we were in the direct path of what appeared to be a gathering stampede, several of us would run out, shouting and shooting our pistols to scare the leaders. In this way we succeeded in changing their course sufficiently to save our train from becoming entangled.

There was only one advantage in being near to the big herd. We had choice cuts of fresh meat every day, and in addition

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jerked quantities of the tenderloin for future use by cutting it in strips and curing it in the hot dry air of the covered wagons, where it was partially protected from the dust. Without a bit of exaggeration, I am certain there were millions and millions of buffalo in that great herd. I learned after my return from the West that Horace Greeley, while crossing the Platte valley in a stage-coach, just two years previous to our trip, had encountered the same great herd, and that he had estimated it at not less than five million animals.

Three days after leaving the great herd behind, we struck the main-traveled road from East to West, and met many horse and mule trains that were, of course, making faster time than we were. We were glad to see them too, for they brought news of the East, and gave us a bit of new companionship, for which we were truly grateful. We also began to meet the vanguard of the returning army of disappointed gold hunters. Some were walking, footsore and discouraged, many times apparently half starved. Some were riding lone oxen—perhaps the very last of a once prosperous outgoing train.

Others were riding in worn and rickety wagons, drawn by starving, weary animals. The stories that they told were a bit disquieting, and anything but encouraging to a party that had gone through all that we had experienced.

They told us there was no gold, after all; that it was all a gigantic lie; that provisions were priceless, flour often selling for one hundred dollars a barrel. The camps were full of sickness, the roadway infested with Indians and bandits, and that every known disease was running rampant in the hills, killing off thousands. Every one that had not already died was preparing to start back, and by spring the hills would be deserted. Some said the roads into the mountains were fairly strewn with the carcasses of horses and oxen that had petered out along the way.

My uncle listened to them all with pity, but with scorn. He had been there before. He had seen this selfsame sort of men and knew them thoroughly. He continually reminded us that these returning ones were the weaklings, the shallow, fickle men that had gone out under great excitement, not fully counting the cost, and often reminded

us that his information was reliable, and that he would certainly find some traces of the yellow gold.

The effect of all these stories on our tired drivers, however, was marked, and finally my uncle felt called upon to contract definitely with each man to give him half-time work for two months after our arrival, or until they could get mines of their own opened up and in working condition. It was in these discouraging days that Red Wilson proved a real boon. He would tell stories by the hour, and had the wonderful faculty of being able to see the funny side of everything unfortunate that happened. He helped many of us keep a stiff upper lip and stay hopeful when things looked awfully dark.

One evening we came up with a dilapidated old prairie schooner, to which were hitched a pinto pony, a bony mule, and a team of thin, worn oxen that could hardly walk. On the side of the canvas tarpaulin that stretched over the top was painted in big, bold letters, "Pike's Peak or Bust!" Red carefully chose a charred stick from the fire and added just below, "Busted, by Thunder!"

CHAPTER IX

INDIANS!

THE terrible tales of Indian ravages that came to us every few days now upset us worst of all. We feared getting into their country, for we were traveling more slowly each day, and we knew not the moment when we would have to go into camp indefinitely while the oxen rested. Several other trains had sent a man to suggest that we unite for safety's sake, but my uncle declined each offer. Finally, one morning, as our foremost wagon reached the top of a gentle swell, Toleman let out a single exclamation that instantly set every man of us on his mettle.

"Indians!"

Sure enough, just a mile ahead of us, five or six hundred Sioux were camped by the river, while scores of their ponies grazed on the open plain. Toleman called a brief halt, and gave his orders to our men.

"Every man of you arm himself at once,

just as conspicuously as possible, with guns and knives, and put on just as bold a face as you can. If our train bespeaks fear or weakness in any way, we are lost; but if we appear to be strong and ready to fight, they are almost certain to wish to parley and to trade with us. We have made provision for just this sort of a thing, and will strive hard to win their friendship, but be ready for anything."

We drove boldly forward, my uncle, Hale, and Toleman well in the lead, on their mounts, the rest of us following in close formation. Soon several of their braves, also armed to the teeth, came out apparently to meet us, when they suddenly split into two bands, circled our entire train, and then rode back to their own camp. They were evidently sizing us up. We were near enough to count the lodges along the river now, and found there were more than forty. As we approached their camp we were met by a drove of dirty wolf-dogs, which howled and made a great fuss, many of them snarling and showing their teeth. There were many children, who stopped their play to gaze at our big, heavy wagons.

Finally the chief, in gay war bonnet and blanket, came out toward us with hands extended, crying, "How-do! how-do! how-do!" and we solemnly shook hands all round.

They wanted to trade for whisky, powder, and tobacco, but we, by a little talking, were able to please them with an assortment of cheap beads, small sacks of sugar, and many pocketknives that Cy had wisely included in our outfit. They wanted to know how many days away the big herd was, and we supposed they must be out on their annual hunt, which proved to be the case.

We did not stop long with them, but pushed on a couple of miles beyond, and then camped, to show the red men that we trusted them. Toleman declared that was the best medicine, and we were willing to try it, although I'm prompted to say there was little or no sleeping done in our camp that night. Just as soon as supper was eaten, Toleman, Hale, and my uncle selected some of the best of our provisions and rode back to their camp to head off any night trouble that might be developing by a gift. The chief received them in a very friendly manner, and insisted that all of them have a

smoke from his foul pipe, as a sign that they were friendly people.

Hale was much interested in a pretty young squaw who sat in the doorway of a tepee, and the chief at once noticed it. In an instant he began to jabber and make signs for a trade. Hale was too surprised to speak, but Cy just laughed and laughed, finally motioning the old chief back.

"No trade, no trade," he cried. "Boy no want wife yet. Need pony for long time to mountains." Then, slipping some twists of tobacco into the chief's hand, they bade him good night, and returned to camp.

"That was a close shave, Hale," he laughed. "The old chief wanted to trade you his daughter for your pony. That is the regular price of a squaw among his people. Jerusalem! you'd make a great squaw-man."

We were all happy that Cy's diplomacy had saved what might easily have been a bloody battle to the death for prospectors to tell about. Three days later we were startled, just at sunrise, by a blood-curdling yell just to our left. Like a shot Toleman and Hale were out of their blankets and grasped their shooting irons, expectantly.

"Utes!" breathed Cy. "Jerusalem! but they scared me! That is their war cry, and when you hear it there is no quarter given or asked usually."

Directly in front of us, on a ridge of high ground, stood twelve ponies, each carrying an Indian rider, and all in war paint and feathers.

"They're on the warpath proper," said Cy. "I hope none of our Missourians shoot. You slip along from wagon to wagon and tell the drivers to be ready, but not a man to show his face. Our train is big, and they will suppose there are many more of us than there really are." Then, snatching a white towel that lay nearby, and with both hands held high, Cy advanced to meet them. They parleyed a long while, but did not seem to be satisfied. Finally Cy told them that there were three hundred Sioux not two days' journey up the valley. They withdrew to talk over this news, while Cy waited, for the Sioux and the Utes were bitter enemies and fought desperately to the very last, each in an effort to hold supremacy over the great buffalo hunting grounds of the Platte valley.

The braves dismounted and came to our

camp, examining every wagon and its contents with great curiosity and interest, until they came to the big engine boiler that was simply chained fast to the running gear of a short wagon.

"What him?" asked the chief of the band with great concern.

"Heap steam cannon! Big shoot!" answered Toleman seriously. "Him much kill," he added, spreading his arms in a big sweep so as to take in half of the prairie.

The chief was much impressed, and at once treated us all with renewed respect. We filled them full of white man's breakfast, Bill fairly outdoing himself with his flap-jacks. My uncle presented the chief with the pistol Jake had left behind, which, of course, pleased the old redskin very much. In a little while they rode away, after having seen everything we had and having carefully estimated our strength. There was no doubting their interest in our stock from their many glances toward them. When they were safely out of hearing, my uncle turned to Toleman, with his hand extended in a friendly way, a happy smile on his face:

"Cy, you are a marvel of ingenuity. We

were just about man to man, and they had the advantage over us of being mounted. Your cannon yarn saved our hides to-day, for those redskins are looking for blood, if I'm not mistaken. I'm glad they are gone."

"But they are not gone," said Toleman, much to our surprise. "They will be back again soon, and stay as long as we'll feed them. We must keep a sharp eye out to-night, for they are the slickest cattle thieves in the West. They will steal your horse right out from in under you and leave you to walk. Hale and I had better do the guard duty to-night, and we must leave the stock out in the open. If they get a suggestion that we are doubtful of them, or afraid in the least, they will harass us for days, and some one's life is bound to pay the price. You and Red stay with the train, and watch the off side. If they do sneak in, then shoot to kill."

We camped that night just by a huge prairie-dog town. Acres and acres of the valley were upturned, in sandy little mounds. Needless to say, the men slept in their wagons that night, while the cattle were taken but a little distance away to a meadow.

We had an early supper, and then built a rousing fire and kept on the move about it all the evening, so that it would be a bit difficult for an observer from the distance to count just how many of us were present and how many were off on guard duty. Toleman and Hale, heavily armed, went out to the stock and prepared for their night's vigil, deciding just what they would do in case of surprise.

"They don't want to fight," said Cy. "They know now that we are well armed, and believe that we have a 'big cannon'; but what they do want is our stock and the horses. If they bother us at all, they will probably try to stampede the stock first. That's the safest way for them. If that does not work, they will try to steal them one at a time. I've divided the oxen from the cows, and I've half a notion to let them get a part of the cows, if it comes to that or fight. I'd like to get all our own men safely to Colorado. I don't want to shoot unless I have to, for as the old saying goes, 'Discretion is the better part of valor.' If we start that sort of a thing, we will have to fight to a finish, and it will be costly at best.

"If they try to stampede our cattle, they will do it by driving a herd of their loose ponies by our stock at a wild gallop, and then follow closely after them with their bloody war cry. Such a game often works very well, especially when you don't know that Indians are near you. The very next day, after having driven away your best stock, they will often come back to your camp to be fed and to trade with you.

"I'll sleep first. Waken me instantly if there is any uneasiness among the stock, or if you hear any sort of an unusual sound. These redmen are expert at imitating the wolf, and in that way often get very close to the herd before being discovered. We must watch close."

Hale could but admire the man, for in a moment or two, even in the very face of impending danger, Cy was peacefully sleeping. Hale was lonely, and kept his every sense alert for the slightest sound. But all was still—oppressively so. All that he could hear was the oxen chewing their cuds, and the occasional little cough of the Captain's mule that grazed nearby.

After two or three hours' sleep, Cy de-

liberately awoke, rose as if he had not been asleep at all, and was instantly as alert as Hale himself. He bade the boy lie down, which he did, but not to sleep, as he had determined. Finally he did doze off, lulled to sleep by the petulant chirp of the crickets and the soft-scented breeze that was astir. It seemed he had slept but a few moments (in reality it was hours) when Cy gently wakened him and instantly placed his hand over the boy's mouth, to signal silence. Then he whispered in his ear:

"They are yonder, and I think they have brought some reenforcements. At any rate, there are at least twenty 'wolves' out yonder. Some of the oxen on the off side have lain down. They will make excellent breast-works as long as they lie still. Don't shoot till you hear me shoot, unless you are attacked and must protect yourself. They are going to try to steal first. If they don't succeed, they will try the stampede. If all they want is a few cows, we'll let them have them, for we can't be more than two hundred miles from Denver now, and we can trade oxen for cattle there. If I open fire, you begin to drive a few oxen toward the

wagons, and keep them behind you to guard against a rear attack. Take care not to lose sight of the train, or you are gone."

The two separated, each to his post, and waited. Hale carefully chose his steps, and in a few moments was making his way among the resting oxen. Suddenly he stopped short. Something was moving among the oxen just to his left. He was certain of it. Slowly he approached it, pausing every now and then to see if he was observed. It was an Indian, he was certain of that, and he knew full well that much depended on his wise action at this moment. He was surprised how calm and steady he was. Slowly, noiselessly, the shadow came nearer. So still was it that he thought his own eyes must be fooling him, and then his heart suddenly stood still, for the savage deliberately raised a huge bow and aimed at him. His mind traveled far and fast in that second, making a number of calculations and figuring out a number of plays. He recognized, subconsciously, that he was in the same state of mind that he had been that day of the big game, when he had faced the opposing line, realizing that the whole out-

come of the game depended on his action the next ten seconds. They had won that day; would he win to-night? His eyes were riveted on the end of the big bow that showed plainly against the white ox in the background. There was a twang—he felt it rather than heard it—and instinctively he fell flat, just as the wicked arrow whizzed by his head and lodged in the rump of an ox behind him. In a second the cattle were astir. He raised his rifle, took hasty aim, and fired. The figure dropped, but instantly there was another, a few feet to one side. He shot again, rolled over, darted under the legs of the old ox that had come to her feet, and waited breathlessly.

He heard Toleman fire a half dozen times on the opposite side of the herd. The cattle were all up now, and blowing softly through their great nostrils, as if sensing the excitement. Suddenly there broke on the still night air the war cry of the Utes. He knew the whole band were upon them. In that same instant he realized that if the stock should run, he was in danger of being trampled to death in the rush.

Just then he saw two savages on the outer

edge of the herd trying to cut out a bunch of the stock. He shot. There was a piercing cry; one dropped, and the other disappeared. He could hear shooting at the wagon train now, and knew that they were also killing savages.

Soon the cattle began to move. Hale had just a moment of indecision—to stay was certain death, to ride, gave him a fighting chance. He vaulted to the back of the big ox next him, but in so doing lost his rifle. He lay low on the back of the big beast as she broke into an excited run. He realized that all was lost unless Cy and the Captain could divert the stampede and head it into the spongy ground of the prairie-dog town instead of onto the open plains.

For the next few moments he was kept busy and alert, keeping his hold, for the oxen were crowding each other badly. He had the sensation of traveling in a circle, and soon, to his surprise, caught a glimpse of the wagon train to his extreme right, when only a few moments before he was positive it had been on his left. With that realization came great relief, for he well knew that Toleman, and perhaps his uncle, were some-

where out there, making desperate efforts to keep the stock together by driving them in a circle.

He tried hard to guide his critter to the outside of the herd by pulling desperately on the left horn, but progress was very slow. It seemed hours to him before the herd began to slow down again, and then he heard voices behind him. He raised his revolver and fired one shot, for that was all he could spare. In a moment Cy was at his side, peering into the darkness.

"Is that you, boy?" he called.

"Yes," replied Hale. "I'm mounted on an ox and my rifle is gone. Where are the Indians?"

"They have withdrawn to parley. We surprised them and got at least a half dozen of them. It will be daylight in thirty minutes, and then we're safe. Keep to your mount, and shoot anything that moves on the plain. If the stampede gets away, keep to the edge and shoot your critter. I'll keep my eye on you."

When daylight came, we found we had lost six oxen, the Captain's mule, which had been shot from under him, and one Mis-

sourian had a nasty arrow in his ribs. There was not a sign of an Indian in sight, except two dead ones, which had been trampled pretty badly by the cattle. They were probably the ones that Hale had shot. We had been on the road only two hours, when a band of Sioux raced into our camp, inquiring if we had seen any Utes. Cy told them what had happened, and in a moment they were off at top speed to find the invading Utes.

"That's the end of at least that band," said Cy. "Let's hope we'll get into Denver without another such night."

CHAPTER X

GOLD FOR THE DIGGING!

THE loss of our oxen that had been killed and stolen by the Indians handicapped us very seriously, for we were compelled to double up on some of the loads and abandon two wagons. But on the whole we felt that we had nothing to complain about, for we had gotten off miraculously with our lives. From that day on the unexpected was always happening to us. We were now in the land of the alkaline deserts, sage brush, and greasewood, and of sad, bleak, lonely stretches. The alkali was very disagreeable, and there were such quantities of it. Often our wagons would sink into several inches of the white dry soda, and the irritating dust would rise about us in clouds, causing sore eyes and infected throats, to man and beast alike.

Just imagine walking nine or ten miles a day through such country, very often being compelled to unhitch and trudge back to help a less fortunate load out of a soft

place, and then set guard for two hours the same night over a herd of broken and dispirited cattle. It was tiresome to the extreme, for every man had to himself walk to lighten his load.

My uncle had grown ten years older, and did not seem half so alert to me as when we started. I noticed that he ate very little, and that every morning the first thing he would do was to scan the Western horizon with his glasses, in hopes of sighting the mighty Rockies; but morning after morning he would turn away more disappointed than ever. The common camp labor became simply intolerably wearisome to the men, and many of the ragged, gaunt drivers strolled around as in a dream, talking to no one and eating but little. At night the sky would blacken, the lightning race across the heavens, and the thunder roll in mighty crescendos, just as if we were about to have a second deluge, but no water came. The men slept in the wagons, because it looked so stormy, and one night while I was sleeping in on top of the powder the lightning struck the tire of the wagon just behind me and frightened me terribly. It had never

occurred to any of us up to that time what would have happened to our train if the lightning should strike that powder wagon. You may be sure that after that the powder wagon was drawn well to one side at night and left unoccupied. Just two days later we came upon the wretched remains of a wagon train, that plainly told of a terrific explosion.

"Struck by lightning!" declared Cy. "We got off easy. I could engineer a herd of cattle to Alaska, but when it comes to a wagon train, well, I'm lost. There's too many things to remember."

Finally the showers came, and, to say the least, they were refreshing. Here and there pools of water gathered on the flats. At first the cattle drank deep and often, then, to our great horror, they began to die, until in barely three days' time nearly one third of our remaining number were sick or dead. What remained were too few to pull the heavy loads. What were we to do? We held a long council of war, and finally decided that we must leave six loads of the heaviest machinery with a guard, while the rest of us pushed on to Denver. Red Williams and one of the other drivers consented

to stay with the machinery until we could send for them. So after provisioning them well for a month, and selecting as good a water hole as we could find, we helped them rig a temporary camp; then pushed on, leaving them a quantity of goods to trade the Indians, in case they should bother again.

Still our oxen continued to die, until some days we thought it doubtful if any of us would ever really see Denver. Bill Sikes, who had not been at all well for weeks, suddenly got the idea that some one of the drivers was poisoning the critters. We had a driver who had been very sullen and who, we remembered, had sided strongly with Jake and Keats, but I was sure he was innocent of any such a crime. However, Bill insisted on butchering each ox as it died, to examine its entrails. He found the entire inside in a high state of inflammation, and declared it poison. But I knew full well it was just the result of the fearfully strong alkali water.

One morning, a week later, my uncle called us all from our bunks in great excitement, and pointed to the Western horizon, crying:

"It's the mountains, boys! It's the mountains! Thank God for them!"

Toleman was first to take the glasses from him, and after gazing for a full minute, he handed them to me, with the exclamation:

"Jerusalem! but they do delight my soul. They are there all right—from Long's Peak on the north to Pike's Peak on the south. Boys, we're back into God's country again, and we'll soon be digging nuggets as big as roosters' eggs on Easter. Hurrah!"

We differed, however, as to whether it was really the mountains we saw or just a bank of clouds, but Cy's positive position on the matter put backbone into every one of us, and at the campfire that evening there was real rejoicing. It was the first time I had seen my uncle laugh for weeks, and it did me good to hear him once again.

"In five days we will have deer meat," promised Cy. "And in ten days we'll be in paradise. All we need to do is keep a'going. Wish old Red could see those hills once; but it won't be long now till we'll be going back to get them."

The next morning the mighty mountains rose cold and silent, reaching high into the

purple haze ahead of us. Some of them no doubt had slept there since the world began, buried under their canopies of snow. Two hours after sunrise Cy rode into camp with the carcasses of two fat young antelope. The meat was a great treat to us all, and was the beginning of much wild game that we found everywhere plentiful. That evening we camped on the picturesque old ruins of Fort Saint Vrain, in the shelter of its high, thick adobe walls. We knew full well that Denver lay just beyond in the rolling hills, and we rejoiced.

Denver was at that time a typical Western town of one-story log huts, tents, and crude frame buildings. Everywhere were camped parties like our own—tired, worn, and many of them sick. For instance, our train had shrunk from a well-equipped, prosperous-looking caravan to eight rickety, very much-the-worse-for-wear wagons, and as thin and tired a lot of gaunt, ragged drivers as you will ever see in this world.

No one paid the slightest bit of attention to us, for every one was too busy with their own affairs to care anything about how we had fared. I saw many strange sights that

day, that I won't soon forget. For instance, a Chicago banker had opened a bank in a ragged tent. A baker was erecting an adobe oven in which the pies and cakes for the surrounding camps were to be baked. There was a blacksmith shop of some kind on every corner, and all were busy at repairs. Of course the saloon was there too; very crude, to be sure—often only a tent with a keg of “40 rod” and a rough plank for a bar. There were general outfitters’ tents, containing everything a reasonable man might ask for, from gold pans, picks, and overalls, down to chewing tobacco, bacon, and flour. All sorts of gambling devices were run wide open, and the toughs even indulged in target practice with their guns right in the open streets. There was no law, there were no police. But such things were soon to change. In many places the streets were full of wagonloads of merchandise, piles of mine machinery and tools, and dozens of different varieties of homemade devices to aid in getting the gold from the rock.

Many people were preparing to leave soon on the long return trip, sick, disgruntled, and disillusioned. Others were preparing to get

right into the mountains which lay nearly twelve miles distant, in order to get shelters up and ready for the long winter months that were soon to be upon them.

We decided to rest a week, and then to send four drivers and our best oxen back on the plains to bring in the machinery. Of course Toleman was to have charge of the expedition. The rest of us were to start for the bottom of the mountains, making two trips to bring up the wagons we wanted, and were then to camp and await the arrival of the other men and teams. During this rest my uncle proposed to look about carefully and do some investigating of the best country in which to make our initial prospects. The original agreement was now fulfilled with all of the drivers, but as we would have to have men for some months to come, and as the prospect was not nearly so golden for them to work on their own hook as we had all supposed it was going to be, the men for the most part were anxious to stay with us at a reasonable wage.

The route to the gold fields lay north to Clear Creek, past the little camp of Golden, the life of which had apparently been short,

then on up the cañon to Mountain City. The roads in places were quite passable, and there was any number of grassy meadows along the way, any of which offered splendid places to camp. We finally chose a spot by the side of a delightful stream, and prepared to hunt, fish, and rest, and get into shape for the heavy work that lay just ahead. The first few days were consumed in a trip back to Denver for clothes, needed supplies, and tools; the next few in making wagon repairs and in looking over numbers of prospects that were everywhere. It seemed to me that every gulch was populated with prospectors, most of whom were hard at work. Some were washing placer gold in the stream beds. Some were crushing quartz from the various small outcrops on the mountain and treating it with quicksilver. Some few men, who were more certain of their prospects, had already started more elaborate diggings, either in the form of tunnels in the mountainsides, or as shafts operated with crude windlass and homemade buckets. Others seemed to be dragging all the top dirt down to the stream and washing it in the long sluices through which the water ran. These

sluices had cleats nailed across them every few inches, the tiny obstructions serving to catch the bits of gold which, being much heavier than the gravel, settled to the bottom. The force of the water carried the larger dirt away, and at night, or more often if occasion demanded it, this precious sediment was carefully removed from the cleats and panned out by hand.

I remember we found one outfit of Georgia miners actually engaged in feverishly panning a prairie-dog town. It was so very ridiculous that we all laughed, but when the excited miners noted how skeptical we were of any results coming from such land, they proudly produced each man his long buckskin sack and tipped into the palm of his hand a little heap of the yellow dust. It was here I saw my first real native gold. Then the gold fever rushed over me, leaving me bewildered. I could hardly realize it.

"Gold! Gold!" I cried aloud. "Gold for the digging!" Instantly I was possessed with a consuming eagerness to be at work, to get hold of a long buckskin pouch and to fill it to the brim with the yellow, glittering stuff. I could already imagine with what

pride I would produce my buckskin and display its contents to every eager inquirer.

My uncle suggested after a few days that Hale and I take our blankets, a few provisions, and spend the balance of our time roaming over the hills into the out-of-the-way gulches to see what we could see and learn about the mining game, before our machinery should arrive. We were glad of this opportunity, so set off early the next morning with no particular destination, but to just find out all we could.

It was interesting to meet the different kinds of men and to chat with them, for there were business men from every State in the Union: manufacturers, tradesmen, farmers, adventurers, and thugs, all working side by side, all clothed pretty much alike, in broad-brimmed hats, blue flannel shirts, corduroy pants, and high-topped boots. Every individual to a man was digging as if his life depended upon it. Most of them seemed to be hopeful, and were digging just enough small nuggets and gold dust to keep their hopes high. Every man, we were told, worked away as long as he had any grub, or powder, or money to get more. When

he was "broke," he sold his labor to accumulate more grub; and so the game went on.

In one little gulch we came upon an old fellow that seemed to be alone, but he was happy and friendly. We watched him work his pan for a long while, and finally he paused to chat with us. He must have realized we were tenderfeet, from our questions. But anyway, just before we started away, he shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out a nugget as large as a big bean, and solemnly handed it to Hale.

"Take it, my boy. It will bring you good luck. It has me. And now I dig 'em up like it every day. When you strike it rich, pass it on to some other lad. The gods have smiled on it. It's a charm."

Hale thanked him, and put it in his pocket, saying, "I'll do it, sir, and that right soon, I'm sure. Gold for the digging! I knew it was so, yet I didn't believe it."

CHAPTER XI

A MOUNTAIN TRAGEDY

OUR few days' wanderings over the hills and gulches proved to be very valuable to us long before the winter was over, for it gave us an entirely new idea of things, and showed us at first hand exactly what sort of men and conditions we must associate ourselves with. I have often thought, however, how different our whole first year in the gold fields might have turned out if it had not been for our last day of sight-seeing and for the unfortunate incident that I am just about to relate, for it seemed that every event of any consequence from that time on referred back to that day's experience in a most intimate way.

It happened like this: we had seen about all there was to see, and, boylike, of course believed that we had learned all there was to learn about the mining game. So, after six days of knocking about, we decided that the next day we would start for our camp and urge my uncle to hasten into the hills

and get settled. We were just looking about for a suitable spot for our night's camp, having passed the last prospect, as we supposed. We were tramping far back in a deep gulch, through which ran a singing brook, when we came upon a crude new trail. Instinctively we were anxious to see where it could possibly lead to, so began to follow it up. It ended abruptly in a thick clump of bushes. We were much surprised, and as we stood wondering where it began again, we heard voices from somewhere just ahead. I presume it was the unmistakable tone of anger in them that caused us both to stop short and look at each other. Evidently there was a quarrel going on over some new discovery. We advanced very cautiously through the thick bushes, every step bringing us nearer to the angry miners, yet we could see absolutely nothing of them, because of the trees. I was especially attracted by the loud bullying voice of one of the men, and turning quickly to Hale, who was also intently listening, I whispered:

"Hale, I'd bet my last dollar that was Jake Henderson, if I didn't know for a certainty that he was somewhere back in Kansas."

"Jake!" he said in surprise. "Clayt, it sounds just like him. I wonder——"

I cautioned him to silence, and we stealthily worked our way up stream to where we could better see the men. First we came to a crude cabin, that was evidently very new. It stood just at the edge of a small clearing, and directly in front of it, on the sandy bank, stood an ingenious set of home-made sluices. There was a quantity of fresh dirt piled to one side of them, and there stood two prospectors, facing each other, one with a shovel in his hand. Both men were savage with rage. The one was our friend Keats, of wagon Number Six, and the other, a little weazened-up man, with a very leathery face, a pair of tiny bright eyes and an excellent growth of dirty whiskers. We could hardly believe our eyes; but it was Jake Henderson, beyond a doubt. We crouched low, not knowing just what was best for us to do.

"That nugget is mine!" cried Jake, cursing Keats roundly. "You agreed yourself that all gold from the sluices, nuggets, dust and all, should be mine for the first two weeks, to pay for my building the sluices.

If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have had any sluices at all, and——"

"True," cried Keats, "but this nugget never *reached* the sluice, I tell you. I picked it from the shovel before it was emptied, and you can't claim it."

"But I have it already," jeered Jake, in his savage way, "and I'm going to keep it. You'll play fair, or I'll——"

"I'll have it back, or your head," roared Keats, fairly trembling. "I don't propose to have a crook like you, forever telling me what I can and what I can't have. I'll——"

"Get it if you can!" roared Jake, shaking his fist in Keats's face. This was too much for the Missourian teamster. He sprang forward. Out flashed Jake's gun, but in backing away a step he tripped over the shovel that lay at his feet and half fell. The Missourian had him by the throat now, and bore him to the ground, where he held him fast. Placing his knee across Jake's chest and one arm, he deftly reached into the pocket and quickly removed the big nugget; then, after wrenching the gun from Jake's extended hand, he let the now furious little man rise, turning disgustedly away toward

the cabin. We were about to retreat, rejoicing over Jake's thrashing, when in a flash Jake was on his feet. Two catlike springs, and he was at the back of the retreating miner. Suddenly he snatched the big gun from the Missourian's belt, and with a snarl like a wild cat, cried:

"I'll kill you for that, Keats!"

Twice the big gun spoke, and the miner fell forward on his face, a dead man. It all happened before I could think, for I was too dazed by what I had seen to act, or I would have done my best to have kept Hale silent. But I was too slow.

"You yellow hound!" cried my brother, leaping out of the bushes. "Hands up, quick! or I'll add you to this tragedy."

Jake turned to gaze into the steady barrel of Hale's pistol, and then in a cooler tone, that struck me as very odd from him, excited as we were, he added:

"I have a good mind to shoot you anyway, Jake. Any cur that will deliberately shoot a man in the back like that, without even giving him a word of warning, let alone a chance to fight, deserves to die."

"Don't shoot," begged Jake. "It was in

self-defense. The blackguard has been trying to rob me for a week. This is the second time. He was a——”

“Close your trap!” snapped Hale. “I heard and saw the whole miserable business, and you are a plain murderer.”

Then turning to me, a slight tremor in his voice, he said:

“Clayton, I’m so sorry. Now we *are* in a mess. I couldn’t help it. But now that we’re in, what shall we do? I don’t want this yellow dog on our hands all night, and if we let him go our lives won’t either of them be worth a cent, for if he had half a chance he’d do us both just as he did poor Keats.”

I calmed him down a bit, and after a little talk we decided to bind Jake’s hands and take him down the trail with us. There seemed nothing else to do. Hale did the tying, while I covered the rascal with both our guns, telling him that if he made any effort, no matter how slight, to break for freedom, or that if he so much as opened his mouth, I would shoot him where he stood. Jake obeyed orders carefully, without further parley, yet I knew full well that

even in that moment his clever brains were working to find a way out for himself.

When we found a suitable camp spot, we bound Jake securely to a tree, gagged him so he could not call, and prepared our simple meal. However, Hale refused to feed Jake, and simply allowed him a drink. We sat by our fire a long time, and talked the matter over, with the result that we decided to take turns during the night guarding our prisoner, and in the morning I was to return to camp and consult my uncle as to what was the wisest thing to do under the circumstances.

We were both very tired from our strenuous days over the hills, and found it difficult to keep our eyes open, even to keep watch of a desperate criminal. It was about midnight, while I was on watch, that Jake made vigorous signs of wanting to talk. I carefully removed the gag and let him have his way. He was as meek as a lamb, and pleaded for mercy, winding up with a crafty proposition for me to free him for a cash consideration. He wanted me to untie him, and tell Hale that he had escaped while I slept. Or, if that was not agreeable, he was willing to

buy his freedom, offering us his cabin, placer claim, and two thousand dollars in gold coin to boot, explaining that, after all, the affair was none of ours, that Keats was our sworn enemy for leaving him drunk at the Fort, and that, besides, it would be very unpleasant and expensive for us to attempt to prosecute him in a country where there was no law save national law.

The audacity of his scheme amused me, but, of course, I refused to even consider it. When he finally saw that it was no use whatever for him to talk, he became abusive, and swore everlasting vengeance on our heads if he ever got out of this scrape. I could not but earnestly wish that Hale had kept out of the mess, although my disgust was entirely neutralized by my admiration for Hale's love of fair play. The rest of that long night I spent in entertaining visions of the unscrupulous outlaw harassing us in the mountains, and perhaps even taking vengeance on my uncle's person for our rash act.

At daylight I set out for our outfit, and by hard marching reached it just at dusk. I found my uncle giving orders for a move

forward the next day. He had just returned from Denver, and found Toleman, who had ridden on a bit ahead of the wagon train to say that all was well. Together they had sold a part of the oxen, and made arrangements to store the six loads of heavy machinery in Denver until we should get located. They had purchased a stout team of mules, a supply of cabin hardware, a light wagon, and had then pushed on to camp, expecting to be joined by the drivers there the next morning. Cy and my uncle listened to my story to the end, but both were too surprised to talk.

"Plucky little rooster," said my uncle, finally. "I admire the boy for his stand, but it was most unfortunate for us just at this time." He thought deeply a few moments, and then put the same question that had been running through my head all the day: "How did those two get here so quickly from the Fort? They didn't walk."

"Easy enough," said Cy. "You say he offered you two thousand dollars in gold to release him?"

I nodded.

"It's dead plain," cried Cy, with a tone of

final settlement. "They are the men who held up and robbed the government pay train five miles from the Fort, and escaped on horseback. I learned in Denver that they found the horses there, but could get no trace whatever of the men who rode them in. You see, all new arrivals in Denver make for the gold camps so quickly, and then scatter in the timber, that it's next thing to impossible to find anybody. Of course they sent on a United States marshal to work on the case, but he has no clue. Jerusalem! who'd 'a thunk it! Jake and Keats in Colorado, and ahead of us! And to boot, one of 'em even beat us to the Happy Huntin' Ground."

"Well, then," I said, more surprised than ever, "if those are the facts, we better turn him directly over to the marshal, hadn't we, and be through with it?"

"Not by a jug full!" laughed Cy. "That would never do just now, for if you do, you two will have to go back to the Fort to tell what you know. That means weeks of delay, and winter coming on soon."

"You are right, Cy," said my uncle, thoughtfully. "Of course in a settled com-

munity no man should shirk any duty that the law imposes upon him, but in this country it's different. I think I better write the marshal a letter and tell him the facts relative to our relations to Jake, and explain why we don't wish to divulge our names. I'll add that he will find his man bound in that cabin, and that doubtless the bulk of the government money is there also. Jake would not starve in three days, and by that time we too will be lost in the hills of Mountain City. What do you say?"

The plan seemed a good one to us all. We were to move on into the mountains at day-break, while Cy rode back to the town with the letter and to bring on the rest of the drivers. I was to set out early for Jake's camp, help Hale secure the culprit in his own cabin, and then join our train on the trail that evening.

I found Hale standing guard over the wretched Jake when I arrived, and taking him to one side I told him of our uncle's decision in the matter. Hale felt it was taking a pretty big chance to leave him, but finally agreed, and in an hour we had him back to his own shanty and securely bound,

making him as comfortable as possible. We carried in the dead body of Keats, as evidence, and after listening to one more pleading argument, we pulled the door shut and hit the trail, happy to be done with the whole matter. We had marched fully a mile, when Hale suddenly stopped short, with an exclamation:

"We have got to go back again, Clay. We were in too big a hurry, and we have made a big mistake."

I looked questioningly at him.

"You see," he went on, "Jake will incriminate us in that murder. No doubt he has a plausible tale all worked out now of just how he and his pal were robbed and one of them murdered, while protecting their claim from claimjumpers. Of course it will be all right if no one visits that cabin until the marshal arrives, but some one is liable to come along most any time. That is the chance I don't like to run. Of course uncle Herman has explained our real situation to the authorities, but just suppose some prospector drops in ahead of the marshal, and Jake makes a case. Then we'll all be in for trouble."

I saw his point at once, and asked what he proposed to do about it, for we couldn't take Jake with us.

"We must go back, carry Keats's body away and hide it where Jake can't find it—perhaps bury it, if we have time—and then lock Jake in. I noticed an open lock hanging on the door as we left. You see, a passerby, seeing the shack locked, would never think to force an entrance; but the marshal has definite word that Jake is there; and if he has any gumption at all, he will not be content until he sees the inside. The lock wouldn't keep him out at all."

With real regret that we had ever known or seen Jake Henderson, we again trudged back up the valley and finished our job.

"If the marshal doesn't find that cabin, Jake will starve to death, that's all," I said, when we were once more on the trail.

"I've thought of that," said Hale. "But it isn't likely, for if other prospectors find that shack locked for a day or two they will take it for granted that the prospector has left it, and they will force it, in hopes of finding provisions. They are more valuable in these parts than gold, I guess. If that

should happen, Clayt," he said very bitterly, "then I predict we shall see Jake Henderson again; and God help us if he sees us first."

We walked far into the night before we came onto our party, and then probably would have passed them by in the dark if Cy hadn't been on a close lookout for us, for he had not gone back to Denver, as had been planned, but had sent the note by a passerby; for which we were afterward sorry, for evidently it did not reach the desired party.

"Jerusalem! but I'm glad to see you, pard," he said to Hale, grasping his hand. "I missed you on that little journey after the machinery. What is all this I hear about you and Jake staking out a claim together over in Widow Gulch and then staying up nights with that old codger to talk matters over?"

"Wish you had been along, Cy," said Hale, "we would have done the job different, I'm sure. But I didn't know what was best. I'm so blamed sorry I didn't keep still. But I didn't, and so there you are. I'd feel a lot better if I knew the marshal had Jake in tow and was hurrying him back to Fort Kearney. Tell me all about the robbery. I

believe that's the end of Jake, so far as we're concerned anyway."

Toleman laughed as he guided us into the camp. "It may be, pard. It may be. But I'm powerfully scared it ain't, for a cat has nine lives at least; and if my natural history serves me correct, a skunk is a polecat. We'll see Jake Henderson again, marshal or no marshal, and then, lad, don't forget that derringer, 'cause there is bound to be a shooting."

CHAPTER XII

INTO THE GOLD COUNTRY AT LAST

I WELL remember how disappointed I was in my first view of Mountain City. I had expected to find it a regular beehive of busy miners; to see buildings going up; to find great piles of merchandise stacked about in the streets, and many other such signs of progress. I had read so much of "a city built in a night in the heart of a wilderness" that my expectations were large. To my surprise, every man, save a few loafers, was away in some nearby gulch or ravine, digging gold. I was told that many of them hardly stopped work long enough to eat a meal, let alone long enough to build shanties and stores. There were in all but a few poor log huts, and probably a hundred tents, many of them very much the worse for wear. There were numerous makeshift saloons, of course, and a general store or two. I was informed that they had not

struck it rich enough as yet to make a real town profitable.

"Just you let a miner turn up a bushel or two of nuggets, or find a big vein of 'free gold,' and then you will see what happens," an old prospector told me; and I only hoped that I might have that good fortune to see just such things happen.

As a matter of fact, the exact spot being prospected was not more than ten miles in extent. Several small stamp mills were up and already at work, crushing the lowgrade quartz from the many lode claims. As most of these mills were near the encampment itself, we decided, after looking about a bit among the miners, to move on up into the valley as far as Gregory Gulch and erect our mill near the Bobtail claim, which was at that time producing what appeared to be very rich ore. We were informed by the excited miners at the Bobtail that they were just working a "cap rock," and that when *it* was once penetrated there wasn't a shadow of a doubt but that they had a bonanza.

Leavenworth Gulch opened into Gregory, and as many especially good prospects were

being turned up there every day, my uncle and Cy decided that that was the place for us to erect our mill. Furthermore, just above the chosen spot the miners from farther down the valley had dug a crude ditch to conduct water to their camp. We were sure this ditch would supply us all the necessary water, not only for our mill but for our cabin. The miners in both gulches welcomed us, and promised us quantities of high-grade in the very near future. We were very enthusiastic over the outlook, and bent every energy to get into operation, for we were sadly in need of funds.

Leavenworth Gulch was crossed by dozens of veins of gold-bearing quartz, so, of course, was staked with claims from one end of the valley to the other. In this district the discoverer of a vein was entitled to stake a claim two hundred feet square, while others could only claim one hundred feet square, so long as they did an assessment on it in sixty days. This consisted of one hundred dollars' worth of any sort of improvements, or a hole of one thousand cubic feet. Just as soon as we could get away, every man of us began staking claims and digging

assessments on every outcrop we could find in the vicinity.

"What's all the big hurry?" asked Toleman the next morning. "It can't get away from us now. Let's think a bit. You fellows remind me of a bunch of hungry hogs rooting for a dead fish. Why, I've been on the everlasting jump night and day for eighty days, sleeping, when at all, with one eye open and my ear to the ground. Now, I move we be sensible about this game. From the way I froze last night 'twon't be very long till snow flies in this valley, and then what? Sleep on a pile of boughs, with the cold, gray sky for a canvas? Not for a skinny second! Besides, you must remember, gents, that it will take at least another two weeks to get our machinery and provisions pulled in here from Denver.

"Why, just think of drawing that stuff into this gulch. Six team of prize oxen can't bring in more than half a load at a time. And look at our critters! We have to stand them all up in a row now to make a shadow. Now I suggest, Captain, that you divide us into two gangs at once; one bunch to build a good substantial cabin in which we can

winter, and the other gang to bring in the supplies and machinery. If one job gets too ternal tiresome for any one, we'll trade off. I'll take Hale, here, and four teamsters for my gang; you take Red and the rest, and let's get busy improving this wilderness estate before we dig gold. Is it a go?"

We all heartily agreed.

"And what's more, I move again, Mr. Captain, that we all knock off a day or two to rest and look around a bit. Let's get out among these ground-hogs and get acquainted. Let's do a little advertising, and tell these gold-grubbers about our mill. Tell 'em it fairly eats gold quartz and is guaranteed to turn out gold bricks whether there is any gold in the ore or not."

We saw the wisdom of Cy's remarks, and set about at once to make a temporary shelter, and to knock together a pole corral, so that our few animals would not stray too far. The next day the men set off, mostly in pairs, to wander about the mines, each man equipped with a shovel of his own, to do a little prospecting in case he found any indications. Long before the second night, a number of the men had "struck it," as they

supposed, and only came back to our camp long enough to draw their pay and to get their simple duffle. Each man brought back with him samples of the wonderful ore that he had discovered, of course, just by a streak of unprecedented luck.

This exodus of men from our camp bothered my uncle greatly, for he well knew it would take quantities of labor to erect our mill and get our machinery into the hills. So he went hastily to Cy, to see what could be done about it. That steel-hardened plainsman, who was never dismayed at anything, just laughed, and said:

"Cap, I had no idea my little scheme would work so well when I suggested that holiday. Let 'em go, every mother's son of them that want to go. They have come more than a thousand miles over a scorching prairie, through buffalo, Indians, and drought, to dig gold. Let 'em dig it, man. But, say, don't you suppose they have got to eat too, along with the diggin'? You can't sweat on the business end of a pick-handle in these hills all day without developing a surprising appetite, and before long their little wages will be eaten up, and they

will be coming back asking for work, in order to buy more grub so they can dig more rock. Now, there was no use in the world of us feeding a discontented pack of Missourians and keeping them laying around here. If part of 'em never come back, so much the better for us. The ones that do come will mean business and will work hard. Then, instead of paying them for their work with what little money we have, let's 'grub stake' 'em. We won't give them too much at a time, and in that way we'll be having help all the winter and everybody will be dead busy and happy. I guess that's just about what we want, isn't it? But I think we better take Red and Sikes into our little company some way, at once, for we have just naturally got to have a cook and a mechanic. That's the only way we can hope to hold 'em, and, Jerusalem! man, there is gold enough here for us all. Just wait till this old mill gets to belching out gold bricks."

When all was perfectly arranged, Toleman, Hale, and I started on a little jaunt about the gulch to look into the prospects and to do some advertising. We came first to an old fellow who was "panning" in a

stream bed just below us, and we stopped to watch him as he deftly swung the heavy, flat pan so as to toss off the coarse rock and sand. He would then bend eagerly to the task of panning out the yellow dust from the sediment that remained. After we had stood eagerly watching for some moments the old fellow looked up at us with a mysterious, confidential wink, and motioned for us to come closer to him. We did as we were invited to do, and there in that one pan of gravel were three splendid nuggets. They were not large, to be sure, but worth three or four dollars apiece, so he told us.

"Jerusalem!" cried Cy. "Twelve dollars a shake on an old tin pan. Boys, we'll be rich men by the time flowers bloom again."

We watched the old fellow for a half hour, and each panful of dirt yielded richly. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but it was always gold in paying quantities.

"Getting rich?" I inquired of him.

"O, yes," said the old man, positively. "I'll soon have more money than I can ever use up. You see, I came early and got my pick. I presume this is about the best claim in the Rocky Mountains." He paused to

study us closely, and then went on as he panned again: "I have far more land here than I'll ever get panned out. It's deucedly hard labor for an old man. I think I'll sell a chunk of it, if I can find the right fellers for neighbors. It's a dead sure gamble too. I expect there is at least a million dollars' worth of the stuff on this very claim."

He laid down his pan and came over to us, seating himself on a big boulder. Cy looked at him intently for a second or two, and then he laughed that same knowing little half-maddening chuckle that made him different from all the other men I had ever known, and motioned us to come along. We left the old man at his pan, and climbed off up the trail. When well out of hearing Cy turned to us and said:

"His derved talking spoiled his game. Beats all how a fellow's talking is everlastingly getting him in a fix. Boys, them same nuggets are being washed out of that same dirt every day for every tenderfoot that comes along. I'll bet my shirt there isn't fifty dollars worth of gold in the whole placer."

We spent all that day strolling round

the valley. Toward evening we came upon a group of excited miners making crude assays by an open camp fire. They would take the ore, crush it to fine powder in a small mortar, and then treat it with quicksilver. When once the quicksilver had gathered all the golden particles from the rock dust, it was poured into a big iron ladle and held into the fire until the mercury entirely vaporized, leaving the gold behind in the ladle. Evidently, the gold showed very strong, for the miners were all much excited, and crowded around each assay to see the results with their own eyes. Finally the big miner at the ladle turned it over to his partner to test the batch he had been preparing in the mortar, and ambled up to us. No doubt he noted our new overalls, and thought probably we were new arrivals and that we had some money.

"It's the greatest discovery in the gulch," he whispered, confidentially. "The vein is twenty inches wide, and a tunnel will get her. We're only in the 'cap rock' yet, and she shows two thousand dollars to the ton right now."

Then, after watching his partner at the

ladle until he produced his bit of gold, he turned to me, and said: "There are a few claims yet. I'll take you men there to-night for a hundred dollars cash, or for a month's grub stakes. I realize I can't keep it a secret long, it's too rich; but I'm broke. Do you want to share?"

Toleman was thoroughly interested, and so were we all. We watched the two crush the rock and treat it. The gold was there very strong. There could be no question about it. Apparently, two others across the group were accepting the same proposition. Why should we waste good time prospecting for ourselves when some one else, who was hard up for grub, had already stumbled onto a rich "pay streak" and was willing to sell reasonably?

"I'll go you on the grub stakes," said Cy, an excited tremor in his voice. "Where will we bring them?"

"I'll meet you where this trail crosses the stream," said the prospector, earnestly. "Come alone, and bring your grub with you, for I won't be coming back again. I want to get right to work before the discovery leaks out."

We were off for our camp in wild elation, and without saying a word I at once began to pack together what was known as a month's grub stakes of flour, bacon, coffee, sugar, and beans, while Cy told my uncle of our good fortune. He listened attentively to the end, and then he laughed—O, how he did laugh!

"Cy, I knew the boys were greenhorns, but I thought better of you than that. That is one of the old forty-nine grafts, and it most always works on tenderfeet. I'll wager those men have contracted for at least a year's grub to-day, for maybe twenty dollars' worth of gold, all of which they yet have. That quicksilver with which they were making those tests was *loaded* with gold, and they would have gotten the same results from desert sand or Missouri mud. But of course you didn't know that. That little game cost me my whole stake in California once."

Cy looked at him almost incredulously, and then he too laughed. The grub stakes were again put away, and we settled down about our own fire to talk it all over. Each told what he had seen and heard, and after

Cy had finished he rose to leave, but my uncle called him back.

"Better let the grafters go, Cy," he laughed. "They have got to have food, you know."

The Captain himself had been down a number of shafts that day, and had examined carefully many of the best lodes. He had listened to glowing descriptions of "pay streaks" and "crevice deposits," and rich placers. He talked glibly of "blossom rocks," "wall rock," and "pockets," until we begged for explanations. The rest of the evening was a practical lesson on gold-mining, from which we all greatly profited. On the morrow we went to work, but more intelligently, I'm sure, than without our day's adventures.

CHAPTER XIII

STAKING THE POT-HOLES

CY'S prediction in regard to our men proved to be exactly right, for by the third day half of our best drivers returned to camp, and on the morning of the fourth, agreements had been made with each of them that were satisfactory to both.

We began at once to fell logs for our cabin, while Toleman saw to the unloading of what stuff we had brought in with us from Mountain City before setting out for the rest of our party who had been left in Denver. When his little task was completed, he called Hale to him.

"Hale," he said, "I've been thinking, and, as you know, I never had any use for Jake Henderson, but I'd hate to be guilty of starving any man to death, even if I knew he was a scoundrel. I'd rather shoot him outright. What is more, it won't be so very long now till this camp, like every other gold camp the world over, will be setting up some sort

of law and order. I've been thinking it would be unfortunate if it should ever leak out that we had really starved a man to death. Of course the real facts of the case could never be known by all, and I tell you, boy, suspicion at your door is often worse than crime itself—in these mountains at least."

"Well, what can we do?" asked Hale. "I'm certain the marshal has Jake long before this, but there is the bare chance that he might never come, and that Jake might suffer."

"I think you and I had better knock off work and ride over there to-day, just to take a look and make certain."

In a little while both men were gone, and I found myself wondering all the day what they would find out; even speculated some on several possible things that might develop before we really finished with Jake. What if they should find him still there? What would they do with him? It was dusk before they came slowly up the trail again together, and I rushed out to meet them.

"Gone!" said Hale, in answer to my question, but there was a strange note in his

voice and I felt that he had not told me all there was to tell. Finally he told me that the cabin door had been forced open and that Jake *was* really gone; that the ropes with which we had bound him so securely lay in the center of the floor. The stove was yet warm, and there were many evidences that a meal had but recently been prepared. Cy refused to talk much about it, and appeared to be very gloomy, so I pushed the matter no further for that night, although I had mighty serious doubts if the marshal had really gotten our man.

Bright and early the next morning the gang were off for Mountain City, and then followed days of such strenuous toil that, as I now look back over them, I wonder how we ever endured them at all, even for gold. I can see those oxen straining at their loads, as if they would pull themselves to pieces, for in many places the roads were simply impassable—running straight up steep hill-sides, over rocky ledges, and then slipping down the mountains so precipitously that the fore wheels of each wagon had to be locked with heavy chains to keep them from running the struggling oxen down. Sometimes

these roads lay up the bed of a mountain stream, strewn with huge slippery boulders. Twice a wagon upset, and, of course, as fate would have it, both times they were loaded with provisions, which cost us great loss. I saw our one precious keg of syrup roll off a load and go bounding down the mountain, like a thing possessed, only to finally crash into a pinnacle of rock and flood the limbs of a big spruce with syrup, much as I had often seen the men do their flapjacks.

I am very certain that the heaviest parts of the mill would never have reached our gulch at all under any other man's direction than Toleman's. Such patience, wisdom, and quick action I have never since seen. Continually Hale was at his side. I could hardly realize sometimes that the powerful, bronzed young man, with a face covered with black whiskers, was my own young brother; but so it was, and I was not a little proud of him.

The cabin—a substantial, well-built affair—was ready for occupancy in three weeks, and well do I remember the luxury of those pine bunks, the rough table, and the benches that Red had constructed from a few rough

sawn planks we were able to buy at a little sawmill.

The work on the mill progressed much more slowly than did the cabin, for during its erection a number of very rich strikes were made in the gulch above us, and, of course, we joined the wild rush to a man. It was certainly wild excitement, racing over the barren granite, staking claims anywhere we could find a vein, and then camping on them all night, guarding them with our rifles until the excitement was past. The last of these great discoveries lay along the stream in the bottom of our valley, and was purely a placer excitement. Every foot of land on both sides of that stream, from the big falls to the little city, was staked and claimed. There were many bitter fights during the days that followed, and some shooting scrapes that proved fatal, but in such wild excitement the loss of a few human lives seemed of little or no consequence, when each new strike brought a fresh supply of greenhorns into the valley.

Hale and Toleman had both been mixed up in some of these rows and had been compelled to drive two claim jumpers off their

land at the point of their rifles. These had in turn set fire to the timber in the night. Cy declared vengeance, and together the two set out to find the offenders. They trailed them far up stream, until the cañon narrowed to a mere rocky defile and the stream became nothing but long stretches of stony rapids, ending in a waterfall that leaped from a granite ledge forty feet above them into two enormous pot-holes in the granite below. They could go no further, and their claim jumpers had gotten away. But as the two sat down to think it all over, a great idea flashed into Hale's head.

"Cy," he said thoughtfully, "placer gold is carried and deposited by water, isn't it?"

Toleman replied that it was, and Hale continued:

"Well, then, the mother-vein of all this placer excitement must be somewhere back in this cañon. It's sure we haven't passed it coming up, so that every bit of gold that is down the stream must have gone over these falls and through these pot-holes. Why, man, they are wonderful natural settling basins. They beat the best cradle or sluice that has ever been invented. Cy, let's stake

these pot-holes as claims. We'll hold them secret till spring, and then we'll work them."

Toleman was skeptical at first of the whole idea, but could see no harm in adding a few more prospects to their holdings. Accordingly, the stakes were erected, and piles of quartz from an outcrop on the mountain set up for corners.

When they returned to camp that evening they found us all in a state of wild excitement, for in our absence from our own camp we had been robbed of quantities of supplies, a dozen cans of powder and many mine tools, to say nothing at all of an attempt to blow up the now partly erected mill. Evidently, the robbers had been disturbed, and had fled before finishing the job. My uncle was disgusted beyond measure to think we had been so foolish as to all leave camp at one time.

"Why should we be treated this way?" stormed my uncle. "I did not realize that we had an enemy in the camp. I for one have been so careful to be friendly to all."

"Looks like Jake's doings to me," shyly suggested Bill.

"Jake, your grandmother!" cried my

uncle. "If the moon should suddenly turn to green cheese, you men would blame it onto Jake. He is no doubt reposing behind iron bars at Fort Leavenworth by this time. No sir, the solution to *this* affair lays much nearer home."

"Better not try much more such doings," vouchsafed Cy. "I'm getting plaggy tired of this cut-throat business, I'm getting blood in my eye, and some of these days a miner or two will just as like as not be numbered among the missing." We all laughed, yet realized that Cy was in deep earnest.

"Just remember you are not out on the open cattle range now, though, Cy," cautioned my uncle, who was always a man of peace. "But living in a civilized mining town, where individuals have civil rights. You can't treat miners like cattle thieves."

"'Bout time some of these little 'centers of culture' began to give their citizens a bit of protection then," grumbled Toleman, disgustedly, understanding that what my uncle had said was the solemn truth.

"'Center of culture' is correct," chimed in Bill from his kettles. "Yesterday a woman and two children arrived across the gulch,

and last night I heard two Tom cats having an altercation outside. 'Fore you know it, this camp will be having a missionary society, and perhaps a grand ball. I heard it said that a preacher was prospecting in Gregory and that Mountain City already owned two doctors and an undertaker. We're a coming me-tropolis, I can see that, in all but the protection."

The next day we all set to work with a will to get the mill finished and into operation. My uncle was getting very impatient, for a number of the mine-owners were urging him on every day. The frame gradually took shape, and then the machinery was placed and adjusted for its work.

The principal features of the mill were twelve large pestles, or stamps, weighing five hundred pounds each when loaded. These were raised by machinery about two feet, then dropped at regular intervals into heavy hoppers onto the pieces of gold quartz which were constantly being fed into them. A tiny stream of water led through the hoppers, and as the rock became crushed fine enough it was carried away through fine screens that were fastened under each hop-

per. This crushed rock and water was then led over long inclined tables covered with highly polished copper plates, and finally off into tough woolen blankets. These copper plates had a generous amount of quicksilver spread over them, and because of the great affinity of copper and quicksilver for each other, the mercury clung tenaciously to the copper plates.

As the powdered rock ran over these plates the quicksilver gathered the fine particles of gold; the two combining to form an amalgam that closely resembled lead. The amalgam, when sufficient quantities of it had collected, was then scraped away, put into a small retort-like oven and heated; the heating causing the mercury to pass off as vapor, while the pure metallic gold was left in the bottom of the retort. This gold was commonly broken up into small pieces and carried in buckskin bags as money, being considered for local use worth sixteen dollars an ounce.

We completed our mill in early November, and opened it for business, fully expecting to run it all the winter on the huge piles of quartz that dozens of miners were getting

out from all sides. However, the mill had not been running two weeks when suddenly the water in the ditch above us stopped flowing, because of an intense cold snap. This unfortunate experience suddenly terminated any possibility of our operating till warm weather should return again. To say that we were disappointed would be to put it mildly. Besides, what were we to do all winter, probably snowed in in the hills? It was of course an impossibility to move the mill down to the stream. My uncle was much concerned, and could not figure how we were to live another five or six months without producing any wealth of any kind.

"We have been living on hope for four months already," he lamented, "and now even our hope is all gone. We'll have to put every man on his own resources, that's all, and see if we can make a living."

"Me for those pot-holes," said Hale to Cy. "There is gold there, I know—far more of it than this old mill will ever grind out."

"Then let's get at it," assented Cy. "I'm getting awfully anxious to begin my fortune. When do we start?"

"At once," said Hale. "To-morrow!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE COMING OF THE LAW

OUR provisions ran low, our money was gone, and we were facing a serious crisis when Cy came to our rescue by suggesting that in all probability there were many parties in Denver that would be glad to return East if they could only procure oxen, and inasmuch as we were through with ours, at least till spring, and because grass was getting very scarce in our valley, why not drive our ox teams to the city and sell them? They would bring big prices and would incidentally rid us of their care during the winter months. In that way we could release all our hired men, except the actual company, and we would have just so many less mouths to feed. Several of our drivers had made fairly good strikes, one in particular. Many more were preparing to winter in the hills, while others of them, who had been less fortunate, were planning to return to the States—tired, worn, and discouraged.

Of course Toleman and Hale were again chosen to drive the critters back to the city and to sell them. One of the oldest oxen, that was badly lamed from a fall, we slaughtered for our winter's meat, but the rest were herded down the cañon. As it was at least thirty miles down to Denver, they took the team of mules along, so they might ride back. The first night out it clouded up, and at dusk began to rain. Later in the night it turned to a cold drizzle, and before morning the valley was filled with a biting mountain blizzard, that hissed through the pines with a cold rattle. Winter had come at last, to cover her blanket of white over the beds of glittering gold and to bid mere miners wait till spring.

There followed a general exodus from the hills, and so, upon reaching Denver with the oxen, our men found many men eager to buy and willing to pay in gold. The sales were soon arranged, a few necessary supplies purchased, and then the two set out to see the city. They could not believe how Denver had grown in those few weeks. They had left it a straggling prairie town, scattered out over three times the necessary

space, but they found it a Western city, with streets, some board walks, and a promise of growth that was unmistakable. The old makeshift saloons were gone, and in their places were substantial buildings with great glass mirrors and polished bars. Several wooden hotels were up, and many tradesmen were at work on all sorts of permanent structures, from banks to boarding houses.

It was while making the rounds of the new city that the two came upon "Mike's Thirst Parlor." It was a splendid, well-lighted building, equipped with every sort of a gambling device known. Across one end of the big room was the bar, and down one side was a long row of small tables, occupied by professional gamblers, miners, and tenderfeet. The place was crowded to the doors, and everyone seemed to be happy. Prosperity was in the air, for money changed hands quickly and with little ceremony, suggesting that there was quantities of it everywhere. Cy and Hale stopped half way down the room to watch a Down-East Yankee lose his roll of greenbacks on a faro bank. As they were so engaged, a shot rang out, and instantly everybody was alert and

ready. Hale had never seen such a display of firearms in all his life as he saw in the next thirty seconds. Every miner, gambler, and cowpuncher seemed to fairly bristle with guns. The air was tense with excitement, and every man seemed to be waiting for some other man to make a move.

Suddenly, as if prearranged, the crowd split, so as to give the men engaged in the altercation plenty of room for gun play. It so happened that Hale and Toleman found themselves at the exact end of the aisle thus created, and could see plainly the trouble. Two men stood facing each other, and of course both men were armed to the teeth and raging mad. The one was a well dressed, stylish man, that marked him at once a professional gambler. The other was an extremely seedy, weazened-up miner, in faded jeans and jumper. He wore a weather-beaten, disreputable hat, and his high boots turned over at the heel. In one hand he clutched a buckskin bag, in the other he held a big pistol with which he covered the gambler.

"That's twice you tried to rob me," snarled the little man, whose back was to

the expectant crowd. "I told you before I'd kill you if you tried that trick again."

"That's a lie!" raged the gambler. "Shoot if you dare. There are a dozen here who would drop you before you could move."

The miner glanced quickly about him to see if the assertion were true.

"Pay me the bet, or get out!" cried the gambler.

The enraged miner raised his gun an inch higher, but before he could shoot, a second shot rang out, and the big pistol went spinning from his hands. All eyes were turned in the direction of the bar. There stood Mike himself, the smoke still curling from his gun. The next instant he was through the crowd and had the little miner by the neck. Like a flash he unloaded the weapon and handed it back.

"Now, Whiskers, get out," he drawled. "You've staged a little show like this before, and you have no spunk. You're yellow. Get out, and stay out. You've blocked these games long enough."

"I'll kill you for that," snarled the miner, turning fiercely on the big Irishman.

"March!" cried Mike. "Quick! I've got no time to play with you."

The little miner started toward the door.

"It's Jake Henderson," said Hale, in an excited whisper, "whiskers and all."

"Jerusalem!" breathed Cy. "So it is. Quick, boy, out of sight." But he had acted too slowly. Jake had seen them both. A wild light sprang to his eyes, and in an instant he whipped out a second gun, and cried:

"You here? I'll kill you too. I swore I would."

Hale was too dazed to think. He was just conscious of one fact—his derringer was not up his sleeve.

"I'll drop you in your tracks if you move, Jake," cried Cy, as alert as a big squirrel.

"Get out!" cried Mike, now thoroughly angered over all the commotion, "all of you. If you want to fight, go outside and do your shooting."

The big proprietor had Jake by the neck now, and was literally dragging him toward the door, squirming and kicking and breathing out threats against the whole world. Jake's rage became a fury, and he fought

like a wild thing to be free, but there was no escaping the giant hand that held him. At the door, the big miner gave the wriggling, cursing little man a shove that sent him flying half way across the street.

"If I ever catch you in here again," he said, simply, "I'll flog you for the amusement of my patrons. Hear me?—keep out!" But Jake was gone in the crowd.

"I told you he had nine lives," said Cy. "We must watch out for him to-night. He is full of murder, and, Hale, it stands to reason he doesn't love you much. Get your little derringer up your sleeve, boy, and keep your eye peeled to-night."

They were just about to leave the place when Cy dropped behind and spoke a word to two stalwart cowboys who had seen the whole thing and instantly they started for the door.

"We better stay in the crowd," cautioned Cy. "That little runt is planning to pot us to-night. If he wasn't crazy mad and half drunk he would be harmless, for he would bide his time; but to-night it is different. He will shoot to kill if he gets half a chance."

A few moments later, as the two stood

on the busiest corner watching the procession of miners come and go, the two cowboys slipped up to Cy and, with a grin, handed him Jake's other gun.

"He was acting reckless with it out here at a window, and I thought he might hurt himself, so I just relieved him of it. He swore he'd kill me for it, and offered to buy it back at my own price, but I laughed at him. You better get out. He has friends, and he'll get you. Jim will keep him covered till you're out of sight."

Cy slipped him a big gold coin, stuck the gun in his shirt, and turned to Hale:

"Let's travel. It won't be long till he'll buy another gun, or steal one, and then we'll have a fuss. We better wait till daylight to start back. It will be safer."

"I wish he would fight in the open," said Hale. "I'm not afraid of him, but being around him is like being in a country where there are snakes."

Early the next morning, long before the little city was astir, Toleman and Hale mounted their mules and with their packs full, rode off toward the mountains. All day they kept a keen lookout for trouble, but

none came. It was dusk before the two reached Sentinel Rock, and as they had seen or heard nothing all the way, they decided to take the short cut over the mountain and save another hour's ride. Soon they were in the thick timber. Twice Cy stopped short to listen, but heard not a thing. Soon the timber thickened, and the roaring little stream made it very hard to hear anything save its own wild music.

"I hear a horse," breathed Cy. "Ride fast. It's on our left. There is no trail there. It's in the low timber."

Hale strained to hear, but could distinguish nothing. Just as they emerged from the black shadows into a cleared spot, a shot rang out, and then another. The first passed through Hale's hat, the second plunged into his mule's flank. He felt the animal quiver and falter, then stumble. Quickly he slipped to the ground and behind a clump of mountain birch. Cy blazed away at the mountain, but getting no response, he ordered Hale into his own saddle, and together they hurried toward the cabin that stood just a hundred yards further up the gulch. When into the shadows again

they stopped to listen, but could hear no sound.

"He's gone," whispered Cy, at last. "He lost his opportunity. Too much 'forty rod' last night for sharp shooting. But the scallawag has located our mill, and no doubt we will hear from him every few days until he gets one of us, or till we get him."

"What were those shots?" asked my uncle, as soon as we had entered, for he had grown nervous of late with worry and disappointment, so that it took very little to upset him. "I saw a strange rider out yonder twice just before dark. He seemed to be looking for corner stakes, but kept well into the shrubbery. He was on a mule, I think."

"It was a hold-up, Captain. He got one good mule and other information, but fortunately not either of us, although he no doubt would have liked to. Captain, it's time for this gulch to organize itself for protection against the lawless," said Cy.

"The desperadoes and crooks in Denver are as thick as molasses, and when it gets too hot for them down there they take to the hills. That was a dried-up, weazened-faced thug that just tried to pot us as we hit the

trail to the shanty. No doubt he has been laying for us all day. His ugly face is masked in a few months' dirty whiskers, but I know him just the same. He's out for scalps. Before long it won't be safe for any of us to leave this cabin after night."

"Jake!" blurted out Bill Sikes. Sometimes he seemed to have Jake Henderson on the brain.

"O, no," said Cy, derisively. "Not *our* Jake. He must be behind iron bars at Leavenworth!" Then, in plainly disgusted tones, he cried, throwing off his coat and hat and loosening the neck of his shirt: "It was Jake Henderson, of course. Who else would shoot at a man like that in the dark? Yes, Jake is at large, determined to clean us all out. We saw him in Denver, and worse than that, he saw us. I'm afraid he'll get some of us, unless we get this gulch stirred up at once. It's time for the Vigilantes to take a hand."

Then he told us very clearly just what had happened in Denver the night before, emphasizing the fact that every man of us must now be on the constant watch for Jake if we valued our lives even a little.

"I believe the time has come to organize," said my uncle, thoughtfully. "Yesterday, while you were gone, there were two bold hold-ups in Leavenworth gulch, and I understand that thieving down in Mountain City is becoming very troublesome. I'll see the men about it to-morrow. We can't help it if now and then a couple of enraged, half-drunken miners take a notion to shoot each other full of holes. In the long run that is no loss. But when it gets so a man cannot leave his property in reasonable safety, then we must take means to give him protection, even if it takes drastic measures. Some stranger tried to compel Switzer to leave the country yesterday, telling him if he didn't go at once his shop would be burned and he shot on sight. The old fellow confided to me that he knew where a very rich outcrop of gold-bearing quartz was located and that he was simply working his trade to get a start. I advised him to keep his secret and stay."

"No doubt there are quantities of gold in many of these shanties, and provisions are even more valuable," said Bill. "Why, it was only yesterday a miner offered me

twenty-five dollars in nuggets for one ham. Men are getting hard up."

"I'll go about the camp first thing in the morning and arrange for a secret meeting at our mill," said my uncle. "The Vigilantes kept peace and order in forty-nine. They can do it again, and they will. I remember the oath of membership and the countersign."

CHAPTER XV

THE VIGILANTES

TRUE to his word, it was hardly more than daylight the next morning when my uncle was off to talk with a selected list of miners and mine-owners about the advisability of organizing the camp against further lawlessness. Some met the proposal with enthusiasm, but others laughed at him and advised him it was a waste of time. However, he was determined, and by night had gotten enough promises to guarantee a representative meeting.

About noon the same day what appeared to be a professional gambler put in his appearance at the gulch, and from the very first it was evident that he was looking for some one in particular. He wore a black suit of dressy clothes, and his face was clean-shaven, except for a little black mustache. He asked no questions, and talked with no one, but stopped a number of times as he came up the trail to consult a little memoran-

dum that he had in his hand. Evidently, he was looking for a man whose description he had in his notebook. I was working at my table near the cabin window, and could see his every move. Finally he abruptly disappeared into Switzer's blacksmith shop on the corner, where the old blacksmith was busy, singing as he sharpened drills.

I noted that the stranger closed the door behind him. His unusual costume in a wild mining camp had excited my curiosity, so, taking my gun, I sauntered out to see what I could learn. Passing our shed, I picked up a couple of picks that were badly in need of repair. With them as my excuse, I started for the blacksmith shop. When I drew near enough I heard loud and abusive talk, and it seemed to me, from the way old Switzer was begging, that the stranger must have the drop on him. I gathered from the broken conversation that the stranger was trying to compel the old fellow to give up some sort of information that he did not want to part with.

I knew Switzer, and I at once realized that the stranger would never get the information he was after, and, fearing a cold-

blooded murder right in what might be called our backyard, I hastily retreated in search of Hale or Toleman. Fortunately, I found them both coming down the trail from the upper claim, and quickly told them of the situation.

"More of this skunk stuff," growled Cy. "Why, old Switzer wouldn't hurt a hair of a man's head. It's common talk, though, among the miners that he does know where the richest lode in the valley is situated, and this scalawag is taking advantage of him. Come!" We were off at a fast trot toward the little shop.

"Now I'll go in the back door, and you two follow in when you hear me laugh. It will be our signal. Hale, is your derringer up your sleeve?"

Hale nodded that it was, and Toleman, with as little noise as was possible, opened the door and peered in. There stood our friend Switzer with both of his big hands held high above his head while the newcomer kept him covered with his pistol. As Cy entered, the stranger instantly shifted the gun to cover him also, and demanded to know, in a soft, friendly voice:

"Why this intrusion into a private conference, sir?"

"Looks a heap more like a private hold-up to me," laughed Toleman. "All I want is my rifle over yonder. I have urgent need of it."

He made a move toward the corner behind the stranger, who at this point shifted his eye just a second in search of the mentioned rifle, but that was all that was necessary. Quicker than lightning—yes, in less time than it takes for a sunbeam to flash from a mirror, a tiny derringer appeared in Toleman's hand, and with it came a merry laugh.

It was Cy's signal, so Hale and I, hearing it, pushed into the shop with guns drawn and covered the stranger, who was too surprised to act quickly. He now had no chance whatever, and seemed to realize it. He glanced about furtively, as if to find a way of escape. Seeing there was absolutely none, he spoke again. It was like the snarl of a cornered wolf.

"Well, what do you want here, anyway? Since when did you become the custodian of the law in this skunk hollow?"

"Since we became bothered with skunks," laughed Cy, a cold hardness having suddenly crept into his voice.

"Just hand over that pea-shooter of your'n to my deputy, please" (he indicated Hale), "and mind, none of your monkey business, or we'll have a half holiday for a funeral in this gulch to-morrow. Jerusalem! but you city sports do disgust me. Quick! butt first, and keep your finger off that trigger. That's it."

Switzer suddenly pulled a carefully folded bit of paper from his pocket and placed it on the fire in the forge. The stranger sprang forward to snatch it, but Hale was too quick for him, and stepped between. The delay of a second was all that was necessary. The paper broke into flame, and the stranger snarled again at his defeat.

"Now get out!" cried Cy, "and get so derved far that you can't ever get back. Unfortunately, this gulch ain't organized to care for yer like yet, but mind what I say, it will be next time you call. You have no doubt heard of the Vigilantes. Next time I see you in this camp, I shoot. Good day, sir."

Cy swung wide the door and motioned him out.

"I gave you your chance, and would have gone halves with you," cried the gambler to Switzer. "Now I'll get you and the claim too."

"Toleman," said Switzer, in great earnest, "I won't forget this of you. I know where the best lode in Colorado is, and you boys are in on it with me. We'll go to-morrow. I can draw another map from memory that will do."

The next morning Switzer failed to open his shop. Cy and Hale wandered up to his shanty to see what was the trouble, and found him dead in his chair, seated at a crude table, where evidently he had been sketching on the map that lay before him. The bottle of ink, however, had been upset and had run down across the paper, completely blotting out a strip of the sketch several inches wide.

The whole incident stirred the gulch to quick action. Many men who, the day before, had hooted at the very idea of a Vigilance Committee, came excitedly to our mill and urged a miners' meeting at once.

However, it was night before we were finally able to arrange it. Many miners came whom I had never seen before, but Cy seemed to know them nearly all. When the meeting was finally called to order, there were twenty-seven of the better-known miners of our own gulch there. My uncle acted as chairman, and the discussion was soon under way.

"We ought to have an oath of membership," said one. Then, turning to my uncle: "Herman, what was the one used in forty-nine? Can you remember?"

"Not exactly," said my uncle, "but it was something like this:

"'We, the decent miners of this camp, secretly agree to stand together to the last, to maintain order and safety for lives and property against any lawless element, and to avenge the death of any man of us.'"

"That's what we want," spoke up several of the men. "Now let's take our oath and elect the officers of this body. I hate to be gone too long, with my cabin full of high-grade."

Toleman was made sheriff, which position he accepted with Hale as his deputy. An-

other miner was elected secretary, to keep the proceedings of the court, and my uncle was chosen justice of the peace. This primitive court was to have jurisdiction over all disputes of importance, such as mining-claim disputes, criminal cases, and in fact everything that had to do with the peace and tranquillity of our camp. The court was to convene on every Sunday afternoon. Before a month many interesting cases had come up for settlement. Incidentally, the court was a real social occasion too, and brought the miners together for better acquaintance and understanding of each other and of each other's interests. One miner stole another's boots, and was given just thirty minutes to leave camp, being warned that to return meant to be shot on sight. Another man stole a quantity of quicksilver, and was sentenced to twenty lashes with an ox whip. Two desperate criminals were turned over to the national authorities. Next came three murders in quick succession, but as each seemed to have been largely a case of mutual animosity, and inasmuch as the camp got nothing but gain from the death of these drunken disturbers, the court took

no notice of the affair whatever. Two men used the power of the Vigilance Committee to further their own ends, and were compelled to leave the mountains. Their property was taken from them, and finally sold to make funds for court proceedings.

With the firm establishment of peace and order, and the final closing of our mill for the winter, we began diligently to prosecute the work on our own two claims. In one the vein was quite rich, but only two to three inches wide, so did not prove to be worth working, yet the hope that kept us, like hundreds of others, constantly at work was that the vein was bound eventually to widen out and grow richer as we went deeper.

The other claim developed a wide vein of black pyrites that closely resembled the ore being taken from the best paying claims in Mountain City, so we toiled on piling up the black stuff against the day we could resume work in the mill. During these months we spent many evenings speculating on the value of our pile of ore, confident that when it was crushed and washed it would make us a small fortune.

It was in January that two men, who had

taken up an abandoned claim just north of our mill, struck it rich. The original prospectors had already dug to a depth of about forty feet in a "cap rock," following a narrow vein and "good indications," only to see the vein snuff out at that point. Discouraged and blue, they tore down their stakes, packed up their tools, and moved over into California Gulch, where a new excitement was fast developing. The two newcomers relocated the claim, set off just two blasts in that old abandoned hole, and struck a vein of high-grade that paid them that winter alone over fifty thousand dollars in gold, most of which they promptly squandered in the gambling houses and saloons of Denver and Mountain City.

CHAPTER XVI

OUR GOLDEN DREAMS BEGIN TO FADE

“**W**E better be wandering up and looking over that pot-hole claim again, hadn’t we, Hale?” said Cy one morning. “I see the first signs of spring are here, and before we know it a swarm of prospectors will be back in the hills again and the stream will be alive with new tenderfeet. Some one might take a fancy to them granite bath tubs of our’n and camp.”

So, taking a couple of days’ provisions, our rifles, a shovel, and a small pick, we started out, for there was but little more that could be done in camp, even on our claims, till the ice went out and the spring water came. The country was beautiful to see. On one side stretched hundreds of pine-clad hills with thousands of prospect holes scattered everywhere. To the east, through the valley of Clear Creek, as it wound through the intervening ranges, the plains could be seen for over a hundred

miles. Sometimes these plains would be covered with shifting clouds that were far below, and at other times the dry stream beds could be seen winding through the black belts of yellow pine that stretched away to the horizon like an immense burned-over prairie.

We especially liked to watch an east wind drive the fluffy clouds up into the hills, like an immense herd of big sheep, blotting out first one range, then another, until we ourselves were lost in the mists.

I decided that I would go part way to the pot-holes with them that morning, and I shall never forget what I saw as we reached the summit. Far to the West, fully twenty miles away, I think, stretched the Snowy Range with its scores of peaks. The sun was shining upon them, causing them to sparkle in the light like big diamonds set in the purple green of the lower ranges. Far to the South, where Pike's Peak raised her snowclad summit, we could see a raging mountain blizzard playing in the Middle Park.

At our very feet were the unmistakable tracks of mountain lion in the snow. Evi-

dently, the lion had been trailing his breakfast, for Hale reported later having seen the half eaten carcass of a big elk in a small cañon beyond. The squirrels were very plentiful, especially the big black ones, and many a cold night on that trip, we had stewed squirrel with split peas for our evening meal.

Just before I left them to return, we came upon a tumbled-down old cabin, and as there were some signs of it having been recently inhabited, we decided to investigate. What was our horror to find an old miner dead in his bunk, having been shot through the heart. On the rough table beside him lay three empty buckskin bags. The old miner, perhaps sick and unable to protect himself, had no doubt been shot and robbed.

Upon reaching the pot-holes, Hale was furious to find our first claim-stakes knocked out and a crude shanty erected on the land. This was occupied by an old Scotchman, who absolutely declined to talk and who kept a careful watch on our every move. It was evident he was guarding a secret, or else he was suspicious of who we were or what we were after.

"There is a dim trail leading off into the trees from the rear," whispered Cy. "Keep the old fellow busy, and I'll see where it goes."

Cy followed the trail back through the timber until he came to as snug a cave in the granite cliff as could be imagined, and in it were two splendid saddles, a pinto pony and a mule. A big silver spruce had been felled so as to partly screen the entrance, and apparently care had been taken to remove all signs of the animals. Strange as it seemed, and without being able to tell just why, both men had felt from the instant they came into sight of the cabin that they were being watched from a hidden point.

"Something almighty strange about that shanty," observed Cy to Hale. "They are doing no mining, apparently——"

"They! Why, I saw only one," spoke up Hale.

"Yes, but there are two animals. You don't suppose that crippled Scotchman rides both animals, do you? Where is the other man now?—that's the main question."

They were compelled to return home without having accomplished very much. They

stopped at the cabin of the dead miner and gave the old fellow a decent burial before coming on home, but kept what they had really seen to themselves, except for me, and waited developments. Cy was sure something would turn up to shed some light on the matter.

We went to work again on our upper claim, more to keep ourselves busy and in trim than for any other reason. About a week later, what was our joy to open a fair-sized pocket that made wonderful returns. We took some of the best ore to the cabin and crushed it by hand, then treated it with mercury and vaporized it in our own open fireplace. Each ladleful of rock would produce fifty to sixty dollars in pure gold, and we were riotously happy, and dreamed great dreams of what we would do when we could crush and work the ore in large quantities at our mill.

One evening while we were all engaged in this interesting pastime, a stranger knocked at our cabin door. This was not an uncommon thing, for our cabin was the best in the gulch, and many a tenderfoot, and even capitalist, for that matter, had

come there during our stay, asking for everything, from information to grub stakes. This evening it was a lone man of middle age. It took but a few moments of conversation with him to convince us that he was not the usual adventurer, but was a man of high intelligence and no little education. After Bill had fed him well, he drew into our circle and watched us carefully as we prospected ladle after ladle of the precious ore. Finally my uncle brought out the buckskin bag into which we had been putting our findings from the new pocket, and showed them to the stranger. I noted his flushed, triumphant face. He was as happy as a boy. His wildest dreams were coming true. He was in the land where pure gold could be cooked out of the powdered rock in an open fireplace.

"Tell me, are there quantities of that wonderful stuff?" he asked my uncle, in suppressed excitement.

"We can't tell," said my uncle, soberly. "There may be but a few pounds of it. There may be tons."

"Tons? Will you sell that mine?" he questioned, eagerly.

"Yes," said my uncle; and we were all surprised, for he had not even so much as questioned us in regard to our desires, and we held the claim by joint ownership.

"What is your price, sir?" asked the gentleman.

"Ten thousand dollars," said my uncle. "We have other claims, all good ones; more than we can work ourselves, and before long we will be starting up the mill again. That will take every man long hours every day. There are thousands of tons of ore waiting for our mill to begin operation."

The stranger considered carefully. Early the next morning they went to examine the shaft, and when they returned to the cabin the deal was made. We were to take eight thousand dollars in gold and a one-third interest in the mine. The next day the gentleman started back to Denver for supplies, additional help, and a tool kit.

My uncle then called us all together and told us why he had sold our very best claim.

"We have but thirty dollars left from the sale of our oxen and wagons, besides this little bag of dust from the pocket," he said, "and we cannot hire help for the mill when

it opens without money. I am confident that our fortune lays in that pile of black ore, and there are quantities more of it; but it must be milled before it is of any value here."

We boys had hazarded nothing, save ourselves, in this gold venture, so could not complain, although it was just a bit disappointing to us all not to be able to continue our pleasant task of actually cooking fifty dollars' worth of gold out of the rock every few moments.

The next morning brought news of a bold robbery in Mountain City, while all that was known about it was that the robber rode a mule.

Cy sat thoughtfully a long while, after the news arrived, but all that he would say was: "On a mule, eh? There will be more work for the Vigilantes before long, I'm thinking. On a mule! and there is but one in the whole valley." He called Hale to him, and together they held a secret conference.

It was hardly a week later that two of the best-known miners, who had been prominent in several trials in our court, en route to the city for a new supply of provisions, were held up and robbed of their entire bag of

dust. The next day an outlying prospector's cabin was fired. It so happened that it had been well stocked with powder, and a terrific explosion followed, loosening a great granite stratum far up on the mountain and causing a landslide that nearly wiped our mill down into the valley. It was, indeed, a narrow escape for us. If it had not been for the burning cabin, we would have been inclined to believe that the thing had been planned for our destruction.

The next two days Hale and Toleman were gone. No one knew where, but I had my suspicions that they were on the trail of a man mounted on a mule. They returned to camp in the middle of the night, tired and exhausted, but declined to talk. Evidently, Cy was in a very bad humor, so I left him alone. The next day the two rode away again, and did not return till the spring thaw, some days later. The water began to run in the ditch again now. Once more the springs began to flow. Red cleaned his boilers, started his fires, and got the mill into readiness, and we all prepared to go to work on a pile of black ore.

My uncle, however, had grown very thin

and pale, and I began to worry about him, for I very often awoke in the night of late, always to find him sitting in a chair by the fire, his head in his hands. I knew he had been threatened a number of times, because of his court decisions, and Cy was sure this was affecting him. Yet I alone suspected that the real trouble, after all, was that he had come to realize, as a result of his own assays, that our pile of black pyrites, upon which we were all setting such great store, was worthless. I was sure he was much concerned about keeping the rest of us hopeful and helping us get along till spring, when we might have better luck in our prospects.

We determined to begin work at the mill the next Monday. On Saturday two officers appeared and asked for the gentleman who had recently purchased our claim. We showed them where they could find him, and soon to our very great astonishment they returned with that gentleman securely handcuffed and carefully guarded. They asked for a conference in private with my uncle, which was, of course, granted. We never knew just what happened in that room, except that my uncle came out of it penniless.

It seemed that our friend had been the cashier of an Eastern bank, and had embezzled the money with which he purchased our mine. He had come West to get rich with it as a stake, expecting some day to return the stolen money from the profits.

When my uncle learned the facts, and was entirely satisfied that the papers were genuine, he at once forfeited the money paid him, without a protest. But from that day on he was a broken man. His whole scheme for us was a failure, and he was absolutely without funds.

With the coming of the rich claim back into our possession again, Hale and Toleman determined to work it, in the hopes that it would produce money enough to carry on the mill. They had worked it just three days, when the pocket played out, and there was nothing left but hard cold granite; not even quartz.

Suddenly we all became discouraged, but not for worlds would any of us let any of the rest know just how we felt. True, we had perhaps a few hundred dollars left from the pocket. After a long conference on the whole matter, we decided to put it into

operating the mill, as our very last chance. We worked it day and night, but very soon discovered that none of the ore was rich enough to pay for both mining and milling. A general gloom settled over the entire camp. Many prospectors began to move out. McKee, the owner of the only other mill in the gulch, loaded it up and dragged it over the hills to Leadville, where a great silver strike was being made. We closed our mill down at the same time, and that threw Red out of employment. McKee made him an attractive offer, and we released him.

Evidently, my uncle was fast becoming a sick man, and Toleman, more than any of the rest of us, seemed to realize it. The next day, without telling us where he was going, he saddled his horse and set out on a journey. Late that evening he returned with an old doctor prospector from a neighboring camp. After a thorough examination, the doctor said that my uncle was a nervous wreck, and that his only chance of recovery was to get out of the high altitude at once. There was but one thing to do. That was to send him back to the States. To this,

however, he firmly objected, and said he would much rather die in his mountain cabin than risk the trip back over the desolate plains alone. Bill Sikes jumped at the opportunity of getting home too, and offered to see my uncle back for his passage home. Of course we agreed, and soon all details had been arranged. The old stamp mill was sold to get the necessary funds for the trip—that old mill that we had carted literally all the way from Chicago; that old mill that had been the focus of our fondest hopes and dreams, was sold for a mere pittance. Apparently, our whole enterprise had collapsed, and the golden halo that had for ten long months surrounded it had suddenly vanished. All that we now had left was our seasoned bodies and strong muscles, plus a year of first-hand experience.

Soon the gulch was almost deserted, and in a few weeks it was a rare thing to see a miner at work.

“If we could catch that mysterious rider of a mule,” said Cy, jokingly, after my uncle was gone, “we wouldn’t need to mine any longer. He must have bags full of gold by now. Hale, we’ll try our pot-hole again.”

CHAPTER XVII

PROSPECTING THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

THAT night we sat a long time making new plans, for, by our own choice, Toleman, Hale, and I were to be left behind. As we sat talking there seemed to come to us a conviction that, after all, the hills would yield a golden harvest for us, as they had done for so many other men. We decided to form a new company, giving my uncle one-fourth interest for his investment in the wagon-train and for the cabin, tools, and what few provisions remained. We made the cabin our headquarters, and then began a number of extended prospecting trips.

We were just ready to start on our first trip when Joe Watson, who had been one of the best-known miners in the gulch, struck it rich. He had come back unbeknown to any one and just gone to work on an abandoned claim. He was a quiet, unassuming man, with quantities of nerve and lots of determination. He had gone to work,

just as he had a half dozen times before, on an inspiration. He had had many streaks of good luck, and some reverses, in his time, but he was always the same. When he "struck it" he was willing to share, and when he was broke he would patch up his old pants, borrow a pick, and go back to work. This time it was the old Bob Cat claim, just above us, that he chose. In two weeks he took out from a narrow crevice two loads of quartz that looked like rusty iron. He hauled it to Mountain City and it produced six thousand dollars in amalgam. He hired us all for one week, which pleased us, for we needed the money. We got out three more loads from the same crevice, but it produced less than twenty dollars per load.

Joe's rich strike created a great deal of excitement, and soon the camp was busy again with a new population of tenderfeet from the East. Two strange men decided to go on through the "cap rock" of a claim high up on the mountain. They struck it rich, and actually took out upward of seventy thousand dollars in gold.

"We'll strike it yet!" said Cy, the last evening before we started on our trip. "But

if we don't, I believe I know where there is a fortune—stolen, perhaps, but which could never be returned to its rightful owners, for they are mostly dead. If we just can't strike a rich lode or a placer, we'll look into this other matter a bit, anyway."

Hale was about to speak, but Toleman interrupted him.

"Now, don't ask me any questions, boys—no, not now. Just remember there have been no end of robberies hereabouts all winter, and all that gold is somewhere. Jerusalem! but I'll bet there is a lot of it. And the robber rides a mule. It's easier for some folks to steal gold than dig it in these hills."

We planned to take in the new fields to the West in our exploring, and to go over the range, if possible, into the wild regions of the Middle Park. Each man carried his own blankets, a bit of flour, bacon, coffee, and sugar for food, his pistols and rifle for protection, and a shovel with which to prospect.

The first day we walked up the slopes through the pine woods around the head of Nevada Gulch, and along the high ridge South of Boulder Valley. We camped for

the night just below timber line, so as to have fuel for our fire. The trees kept growing smaller, until the last ones were straggly and much blown by the cold, prevailing wind. They were all fantastically covered with moss, and but a few feet high, although perhaps hundreds of years old.

Toward evening we reached the summit of a great crag, where nothing grew save a few tiny alpine flowers. The peak was a vast pile of broken granite, partly covered with snow, and the wind blew past in a bitter biting gale. Far to the north, Long's Peak lifted her majestic head above vast valleys, the details of which were swallowed up in the purple haze below.

We decided to spend the night on top, to see a real mountain sunrise, so made us a shelter of flat stones, which we stood on edge to cut the wind. The sunrise proved to be a very riot of colored clouds, and was by long odds the most wonderful picture I had ever seen. We hurried down the peak, and by ten o'clock were again among the luxuriant flowers. We stopped to rest a bit, and it seemed to us that we had just emerged from fairyland.

In the valley we stopped to carefully examine a series of beaver dams, and about noon came onto fresh bear tracks. Toleman examined them critically, and pronounced them "grizzly," which fact was made certain by later finding numerous rubbing trees where the great beast had left his calling card of hairs high up on the rough bark of the pines. We did not care to camp too close to such an animal, so pushed on as far down the valley as possible. That night we built us a bed of spruce boughs, roofing it over with thick branches hung on cross poles. We discovered, the next day, that we were following an old game trail, for in places it was fairly lined with whitened carcasses of buffalo and deer. It wound gently round jagged cliffs, always following the line of least resistance, although many times we were compelled to climb over, or creep under, fallen trees. It finally brought us through a low pass to the headwaters of Clear Creek, whence we at once came into country we recognized. Already we were coming onto prospect after prospect, and finally a few straggling cabins began to appear.

We were certain that eventually we would come to the falls and the pot-holes. Often we stopped to prospect an outcrop of quartz, or to examine a lode, but found nothing that looked good to us. However, game was very plentiful and the stream abounded with speckled trout, so we were content to camp a few days and rest. The second day on Clear Creek, Cy came into camp about evening dragging the hind quarters of a black bear, and early next morning Hale stalked a splendid elk, so we agreed to camp and eat our choice cuts.

"The stream is very low," commented Hale at the fire that evening. "I suppose it is because of the very hot season. I've just been thinking what a good time it would be to prospect the pot-holes. I don't believe the water in them would be over waist deep just now."

"We can't do that, Hale, without jumping the claim," said Toleman. "That would completely spoil my best scheme too."

"Your best scheme!" said Hale, in surprise. "Come, you aren't keeping secrets, are you? Tell us of this latest idea."

Cy declined just then, explaining that it

was a mere idea yet, and that there might be nothing to it, promising, however, to "take us in" as soon as he was satisfied that his theory was sound.

"I think," he said, "that before we waste any time jumping the pot-holes, we better prospect some of these sandbars above the falls. If we can't pan good color up here, I doubt very much if there is anything in your pot-holes, after all."

"A good idea," said Hale, "a very good one. Let's get at it to-day. I suggest that we divide up: one work here on this bar; Clayton, you go down to the next one that looks promising; and, Cy, you take a look upstream."

"But what are you going to pan with?" said I, at a loss to know how to begin.

"That's so," said Hale. "I hadn't thought of that. I brought one old pan with me, but three can't use it at once."

"I saw an old pan hanging in a tree this morning, over where I shot that bear," said Cy. "It's only a little ways. I'll go after it, for it was a big heavy one."

"That was upstream, wasn't it, Cy?" questioned Hale. Cy nodded. "Well, then," my

brother continued, "why don't you put in a little time up there? I'll go downstream to the head of the falls and see what I can find. We'll let Clayt stay right here to keep camp. We would hate to lose this fresh meat, and Clayt can get dinner."

So it was agreed, and both men set off, each taking his rifle and shovel with him. They were to return to camp at noon, for dinner and to report. I busied myself about the camp and started the noonday meal, but for some reason I felt a bit uneasy. I was not a coward by any means, but I had a horror of being left alone in a desolate, lonely place. Accordingly, I began to sing a bit, or to whistle, for some sort of noise of my own making seemed to comfort me. The morning wore away very slowly. Twice I thought I had faintly heard the sound of a galloping horse, but made up my mind that it was only the stream talking to me, for after that I heard all sorts of voices, all the way from the cry of a distressed child to the angry roar of an enraged miner; but, of course, all was mere fancy.

Shortly before noon, Hale came jogging along upstream, whistling a merry tune. I

knew it was a good sign. In his hands he carried nothing but his rifle, but instinctively I realized that he had struck it rich. As soon as he saw me, he set up such a joyous shout that I hurried out to meet him.

"We have struck it! We have struck it at last, Clayt!" he cried. "Pocket after pocket of it in midstream. This stream is full of tiny pot-holes in the bed rock, and each one is filled with black silt. The silt is full of gold. Hurrah! hurrah! And we have it all to ourselves! Where's Cy? Hasn't he returned yet? Just take a peep at these, boy," and he pulled from his pocket seven nuggets, each about as big as a good sized bean. "We camp right here," he laughed in high glee, "and live on elk tenderloin and bear steak, while we pan out a ton or two of nuggets. I wonder what uncle Herman would think of a dish full like this. It's odd, I think, that Cy has not come in to dinner. I'll warrant he has struck it rich too, and hates to leave, even to eat. My, but I wish we had an ax and a few tools, so we could build a cradle and some sort of a shanty.

"We must be sure to not let anyone catch

us at the panning. If we have visitors, to all intents and purposes we are just hunting and fishing. We'll pan a few days, till we have enough dust to buy a new outfit, and then one of us must walk into Mountain City and buy a pair of pack animals, some supplies, a few tools, and get more ammunition."

So we sat, and planned and talked, for nearly an hour, and still Cy did not come.

"He must be finding it in handfuls, or else something has happened to him," said Hale. "You did not hear any shots during the morning, did you?"

I told him that I had heard everything imaginable, but felt sure that all I had heard was only the music of the stream.

"I'm going to take a little look around," he said. So, picking up a bit of cold meat in one hand and his rifle in the other, he started off upstream, telling me to prepare the dinner, and that he would soon bring Cy back with him.

I set to my task, and in half an hour had everything under way. I waited an hour, and still no one came, and when it became two o'clock I was certain something had

gone wrong. Unable to sit idly by any longer, I set out upstream, going cautiously to see if I could see or hear anything of them. A great silence seemed to have settled in the valley, and time after time a chain of cold shivers ran up my back. Yet I saw nothing or heard nothing. At last I sat down to rest and think, every added moment only serving to agitate me the more. I must go on!

CHAPTER XVIII

A MYSTERIOUS ATTACK

I WAS thoroughly excited now, and a thousand fears rushed into my mind. I hurried on, almost running along the stream, for another thirty minutes, when suddenly I heard a faint "Hello!" I stopped to listen. Then I was certain that it was not upstream, but off to one side in the brush. I worked myself nearer, and finally caught a glimpse of Hale as he rose above a clump of low spruce. He saw me too, and waved his hat. Then disappeared again. My heart beat wildly as I hurried on. At last I came to where Hale stood, trembling. His face was savage, and the perspiration ran from his forehead in streams.

"Did you see anybody?" he breathed, eagerly.

"Not a soul," I said, then added:

"Where is Toleman?"

"Gone!" whispered Hale. "All I could

find of him was where he *had been* at work in the bed of the stream. His pan and shovel were there on the bank, and fresh horse or mule prints were in the sand. I thought there were signs of a struggle, but I wasn't sure. I called and called, but got no answer. Farther on I discovered blood on the gravel. I picked up the trail of the horse and followed it. It wound round and round, up one side of the stream and then down the other, but always well back in the low trees and brush. Finally it led off to this strata of granite, and I cannot find it from here. Clayt," he said, looking me straight in the eye, "Cy has been shot from ambush, and his body dropped into some of these ledges of granite, or taken away. We have got to find him. Where is your gun?"

"My gun?" I breathed. "Why, I left it at camp, of course. I only meant to come a little way to tell you to hurry."

"Greenhorn!" breathed Hale in disgust, "to leave your gun behind in a country like this, with Jake Henderson running wild in it."

"Jake Henderson!" I echoed. "If it was Jake, then he has gotten Cy at last. He

swore he would, you remember. What shall we do?"

"I think there were two of them," added Hale. "The trails don't match. We'll go back at once and get your rifle and all our extra ammunition. We will then return and run this trail down, if possible. We will hunt till night, and if we do not find Cy I'm going down over the falls after dark and shoot up that shanty and everybody that's in it—Scotchman, mule, pony, Jake, and all, if he's there."

We hastened back, wild with excitement, forgetting we were hungry. True to Hale's prediction, we found my rifle and both pistols gone, as well as every bit of extra ammunition. Our blankets had been tossed onto the fire, and our provision bags either hidden or stolen, for we could find no trace of them. Fortunately, the two hind quarters of elk, that had been hung on a cross pole back of a thick spruce, had missed the robber's gaze.

Hale's rage knew no bounds. All I could do was to obey orders and follow. He gave me one of his pistols and a dozen rounds, with the sharp orders not to waste a single

shot. We returned again to where the trail was lost on the granite and then separated, each to investigate, agreeing to return at sundown, if we found nothing, and to shoot twice in rapid succession if either of us found any clue or needed help. We scoured the mountain eagerly for hours. Twice I found a few tracks, but they were larger than the ones Hale had shown me. Hale had guessed that the rider had followed the granite ledge as far as possible, because it was open and unobstructed. It so happened that it finally led to the stream, so gave no further clue.

At sundown we both returned, weary and worn and discouraged, but with no new information whatever. Cy was gone as completely as if the ground had swallowed him up. We built us a tiny fire and fed it carefully so as not to make any more smoke than was necessary. We decided to roast a bit of meat, and then put out our fire before night, and as we did not know at what moment we might be fired upon from ambush, we ate in silence, carefully avoiding any stir.

"I'm going up to the top of that point to

see if perchance there is smoke anywhere and to see if any of our own smoke is hanging in the valley," said Hale. But, when a hundred yards away, he turned and came back. "I think it will be better to stay together," he said. "If we are shot from ambush, then we will at least know where the other is. If we had stayed together this morning, no doubt we would know where Cy is to-night. I can't believe that he is dead. He was too handy with his gun to be caught napping. If he still lives, we'll find him in time."

We climbed in silence, and at last reached the top of a jagged slivered granite stratum, from which we could see most of the valley. There was no smoke that we could see anywhere. The valley was absolutely still, and was as wild as if man had never stepped into it. We sat watching the sunset on the distant peaks to the West, each lost in his own thoughts, when Hale suddenly pinched my arm and pointed into the sky. I looked, and there, circling above a series of jagged crevices above us, swung two great birds. They were too high for us to tell whether they were eagles or vultures.

"There is meat among those crags somewhere," cried Hale "It's a chance. Let's go. It is an hour before dark."

He set off at a furious pace, and although I was dog tired, I followed closely. The top of the hill had been burned over years before, and as a result was covered with seasoned fragments of pine that were nearly pure pitch. It was too dark to see over the edge, but Hale was determined. So, choosing a choice bit of pine, he sat down and whittled the end with his hunting knife, so that he could ignite it easily with a match. In a few moments he had made a crude torch. Bidding me gather a few bits of wood for a fire, he left me, with orders to come to him if he shot his pistol; if not, to wait for him till daylight. I gathered my wood and prepared it ready to burn, fuming the while because nature had so slighted me with a puny body, void of muscle and endurance. I was so weary I could have cried out, and I confess that in that hour I almost wished that I was back in my mother's little cottage, seated in my big armchair by the window, instead of in the heart of Colorado Rockies, hunting gold.

I heard a faint sound. I jumped to my feet and listened. Yes, I heard Hale calling me. Snatching a good piece of the fat pine, I lighted it with trembling hands and started toward him. Just how I got there, I never knew, but in a few moments I stood before a crude shelter built against a protruding stratum. In front was a little stone fireplace, and back in the corner of the hut was a crude bunk of pine boughs. I could see fresh horse prints on the little trail that wound over the cliff, apparently from the valley below. Hale was bending over the form of a man in the corner. I hurried to him, and gazed into the face of Cy, but his eyes were closed and his arms lay limp.

"Is he dead?" I breathed.

"No," said Hale, "but he is badly hurt. He is shot through the abdomen, and the bullet entered from the back. Evidently, he was shot as he washed gold at the stream. How they ever got him here, and for what reason, I don't know. We must have water. I must go for it at once. No doubt there is a spring hereabouts, or else this cavehouse would be uninhabitable. But I probably can't find it to-night. If I keep to this nar-

row trail, I can find my way to the stream, but can I find my way back to you again?

"Either the man who brought Cy here, or the horse that carried him, is also shot, for there is more blood about than ever came from Cy's wound. Evidently, he is gone, but may return here any minute, so we must watch. I'm going to take this old canteen and go for water, and leave you my rifle. I want you to sit on that rock yonder and guard this hut. If any one crosses, shoot, but take care and don't shoot me. As I draw near, I will call to you. If I should not return in two hours, you will know I have lost my way and must wait for daylight. Mind what I say, don't leave your post, and don't sleep, not even for a second. Cy's very life depends upon it. If he wakes, speak to him, but don't go in." In a second Hale was gone.

I took my post, my pistol ready and Hale's rifle across my knees. I could hear my own heart beating wildly as I sat there. By and by I heard some movement on the ledge above me. I trained the rifle on the spot and waited. It sounded more like an animal than anything else. I think I sat in that

strained position for hours, until my arms ached. The night was absolutely silent. I think it must have been nearly morning when I heard a voice, as plain as day, just as if it were behind me, say, "Clayt! Clayt!" Up to that instant I had heard nothing, and I am certain I had not been asleep.

I answered, and in a moment or two Hale, his hands bleeding and himself almost exhausted, climbed up over the rock just back of me. Strapped to his belt was the precious canteen of water. My own throat was dry and parched, but I dared not drink, for that water was for Cy. Carefully Hale pressed the tin to his lips, taking care to catch the overflow in his bandana handkerchief. With this he gently mopped the wounded man's face and neck, and then forced more drink into his mouth. At last Cy stirred a bit and turned restlessly to one side. Evidently he was in great pain. Hale cried with joy, and before long I was sniffing too. Slowly he opened his eyes, gazing at us at first a bit uncertainly, then, as he caught sight of Hale, he said, in a voice I can never forget:

"I knew you would come, old pal." And then he closed his eyes again and sighed.

Almost instantly he seemed to relax and feel more comfortable.

With tears streaming down his face, Hale came over to me and said, simply: "Now you can sleep, Clayt. I'll watch till morning; then you can relieve me."

I stretched myself on the bare hard rocks and was asleep in an instant—physically, nervously exhausted, but happy that we had found old Cy. The price that we had paid was not too great.

CHAPTER XIX

FATE SETTLES A SCORE

THE sun was high when Hale awakened me. He looked so tired and worn that he frightened me. Seeing my anxiety, he smiled and said:

“Clayt, now I can sleep just two hours, and then make me get up, for I must go down after that meat and more water. We cannot move Cy till afternoon, and meantime we must not both be gone at once. Shoot if anyone comes near.” He lay down and was soon dead asleep.

As I sat guard, I saw the two eagles of the evening before hovering above, and then I knew that there must be a nest, for they came again and again, each time with food. By climbing high up, I could look down into the crude pile of sticks and mud and litter of white bones. Someway I felt strongly drawn to the birds, for if it had not been for them it is doubtful if we would ever have found Cy at all.

After two big hours I reluctantly roused Hale. When he awoke he was a different man. After giving Cy more drink, and bathing him carefully again, he took the empty canteen and began to search the cliff for the spring that he felt sure must be somewhere near. His common sense aided him in searching the many crevices, and soon his search was rewarded. To be sure, it was nothing but a tiny trickle of water, but it was cold and clear. He drank deeply himself, then brought me a canteen full, returning for more for Cy. When he came back the second time Cy lay with his eyes wide open, the old smile playing feebly about his mouth.

"Nearly got me, Hale," he whispered. "But I'm sure I potted them both before I completely lost my senses. I played 'possum, and when the one came to load me on his horse (I thought at first that he meant to leave me to die, but he changed his mind) I pulled my derringer from my sleeve and shot twice. The first went into the horse's flank, the second, I am sure, went into the scoundrel's leg. He snatched my gun and threw it away, or I'd have gotten Jake, who,

seeing our struggle, crossed over the stream to help.

“ ‘I’ll take him to the cave,’ said the first man, ‘and you go downstream and get the rest.’ That’s all I remember. I tried to recognize him, but could not, on account of the heavy beard; but as I think of it now, I am positive it was the gambler that killed Switzer. You mind, he said he would get me. He is mining somewhere, for he had two sharp drills with him. I don’t believe he knew who I was at first, but just feared I would discover his claim. You know, Hale, I believe he found Switzer’s mine, after all. Tell me how you boys got here, and where are we anyway?”

Hale told him carefully about the events of the day before, ending his story by pulling the handfuls of nuggets from his own pocket and holding them before Cy’s face. Cy smiled, and then said:

“I had some too, boys, just like them; but when I was shot I threw them away. I didn’t want my captor to know I had struck it. He shot me in the back as I worked. I didn’t see him at first. I only saw the rider on the far side of the stream. I blazed

away, but I was too stunned for good aiming. They seemed to be sort of patrolling both sides of the stream. I suppose as fast as a prospector puts in his appearance they pot him. We fooled them by coming in from up the valley. They must have something pretty good, or else they are the robbers who have been working in the valley all winter and this is their retreat. One of them rides a mule."

"The question is," said Hale, "what is to be done with you now? We have got to move to some other shelter, and then lay for the scoundrel when he comes back to see you."

"I don't believe he will come back," said Cy. "He probably knows by now that you two are at large and on the lookout. A coward never takes any chances, and he probably thinks me dead."

"We must build a fire, cleanse that wound with hot water, cook a bit of food, and prepare for a long stay," said Hale. "As soon as possible, one of us must go to Mountain City for iodine and more ammunition, also some tools. Ours are all gone. I'll go scouting, and if I can find a good shelter, we'll

move this pile of boughs to it and burn the rest. By not having to cut fresh boughs it will be difficult to find us. This granite gives away no trails, and by careful watching we would be safe for days. We have a week's meat in the valley."

In half an hour he came back, and we were able to tell from his face that he had found a suitable place. We gently rolled Cy to one side, while we moved the boughs. In an hour we had the bulk of them in our new cave, and also the half dozen tin cans and the little fry pan that had been the cooking equipment of the camp. We then built a small fire, cleaned the cans, and put water on to boil. Hale cut away a sleeve from his own underclothes and, after boiling it, dried it in the warm sun. We then carefully removed the bloody clothing from Cy's back and gently bathed the wound. I noted that Hale's face grew very grave, and he shook his head doubtfully. By night we had Cy moved (although we were almost certain that the moving would kill him), and had the two pieces of fresh meat carried up from the valley. Hale also brought both of the gold pans back up with him. Cy's did very

well to keep a supply of fresh water in, while Hale's made a suitable frying pan. Hale cut a little of the meat into small cubes, and after carefully washing it, stewed it in the best one of the cans, giving Cy the soup. He seemed to greatly relish it, and soon afterward fell asleep again.

"We will each sleep half the night," said Hale. "You first, for at daybreak I must be off. I am going to Mountain City. By very hard marching I can make it by night. I am going to sell the secret of the new placer, and bring a doctor back here with me, if I have to kidnap one. If he will let us move Cy, we'll make a litter, carry him down the mountain, and move him to our cabin by the old mill. He has no chance whatever of recovery here. If I do well in selling the placer, I'll offer a reward for those two scoundrels or the wounded horse; and if I get stuck on the placer, I still have the big nugget that Jake took from Keats a year ago. It got me into trouble, perhaps it can get me out." At daylight he started down the mountain, warning me to be constantly on the alert for danger.

Once in Leavenworth Gulch, he went

straight to Joe Watson and told him of our great misfortune, also of the rich new placer. Joe loaned him five hundred dollars in dust, and urged him not to sell the placer secret, but to keep still, at least for a time. He then hitched up his own old horses and drove Hale on into Mountain City. They went straight to the doctor miner who had sent my uncle back to the States, and, laying a bag of dust before him, Joe said: "Colonel, I want you to go with us on a little trip, and if you bring this wounded friend of mine through alive, I'll have another bag for you just like it."

At daybreak they had started back, but not till Hale had posted his notice of reward for information leading to the gambler and to Jake Henderson's arrest. This was the first of many such notices to be posted in the camp, and it caused a sensation. By the middle of the afternoon the three reached the bottom of the cliff, and Joe stood guard over the rig while Hale and the doctor climbed to the cliff. The old Colonel made a careful examination, redressed the wound, and assured us that Cy would get better if blood poison did not set in. That evening

they rejoiced about the fire, while I relieved Joe at the rig, so he could go up to see Cy.

The next day we had the poor fellow safely moved to our old cabin in the gulch. I was, of course, detailed to care for him while Hale went out to support us. I had no fear that he would fail in this undertaking, especially when Cy Toleman's life and chances depended upon it. Taking a few tools and provisions, along with plenty of fire arms, he persuaded Joe to go with him to work the new placer, incidentally to see if they could get any trace of the gambler or of Jake. After three days of unmolested work, Hale rode back to tell us of their good fortune, and to leave the dust and nuggets secured, for it was fast accumulating. The next week he brought in seventy ounces of dust and thirteen good nuggets; but there had been many visitors, and he was certain they could not hold the discovery secret much longer. Accordingly, Joe had suggested that they take a large number of ore sacks, shovel them full of the black silt from the best pockets in the bed rock, and stack them up in camp against the day of a big rush.

Hale accordingly brought in what treasure they had, and went out to purchase ore sacks. When he had upward of a hundred he started back, but, because he had created some excitement by his purchase, and so that no one would follow him, he decided to take the bags south in the main valley and then go back to camp empty, then on the morrow take a pack horse and go over the ridge on the trail past the cave, and bring in the sacks that way. However, he had not gone far before he was certain that he was being followed. He camped, and that evening struck what appeared to be a game trail that led back into a side valley. When well back into the cañon he sighted an apparently deserted cabin, and thought he might leave his bags there with safety, so went to investigate

As he drew nearer he was startled to hear a horse neigh from the lean-to shelter that had been used for a barn. He found there, to his intense excitement, a poor brute that was in a very bad condition from a bad wound in the flank. It had had no attention, and the flies had so badly infected it that the animal was suffering terribly. Apparently,

it had had no food nor water for days, and was tied too securely to gain its own freedom.

Instantly Hale realized what he had discovered, and at once became alert. Under cover of darkness, he sneaked to the cabin and, being satisfied that there was no one there, he entered, struck a match and looked around. His eyes caught sight of a disordered bundle in the bunk, and upon examination he found it to be a dead man. Finding a bit of a candle, he lighted it and began to look around. In the corner stood two rifles, one of which was Toleman's. On a peg in the corner hung, without a question of a doubt, the suit of black clothes and the hat Hale had seen on the gambler that winter's day in Switzer's blacksmith shop.

Close examination of the dead man showed a nasty tear in the left leg, in which gangrene had already set in. Both legs were badly swollen, and gave every indication of severe blood poisoning. The bunk and body were simply alive with vermin, and at one end of the bunk was a new rat's nest, built from portions of the covers. Fate had

at last avenged the death of the innocent blacksmith.

Hale camped outside, and in the morning put the horse out of its misery. He then packed his bags well back up the valley, and in so doing very soon realized he was near the cliff where Cy had lain. He carefully determined just where he was, then took the line of least resistance over the ridge. He was not surprised to find the little trail leading to the cliff cave. He carefully hid his load of sacks well back from the cabin, took Toleman's rifle and the gambler's pistols, and slowly returned to the city. Avoiding all men, he started at once for the new placer, to talk things over with Joe. Both felt tremendously relieved to know that one, at least, of their adversaries was out of the way. What could possibly have become of Jake, was what really bothered them. Could it be that he too was wounded, or was he just waiting his chance now for a fatal shot?

Both men began digging with renewed vigor, filling bag after bag and packing them into camp on their horses. They had just been at work a week when what they had feared would come to pass really happened.

The doctor, having had just a few too many drinks, had become talkative, and had told fabulous tales of bushels of nuggets to be had for the digging above the falls. The rush arrived in the middle of the night. There were more than fifty in the advance guard, and nearly two hundred in all, and each was hungry for claims. Hale and Joe awoke with a start to find the valley teeming with prospectors, and when the first gray streaks broke over the eastern hills the stream was already staked both sides, from the falls to the cañon wall. Hale sat guard on the piles of black gravel, a rifle across his knees, while Joe told the excited miners where the best pay dust *had been*. He advised them to work up stream, jokingly suggesting that the mother lode must, out of pure necessity, be up there somewhere. So it came about that the Lucky Strike lode was discovered, which in after years proved to be the best mine ever opened in the valley. The dead gambler of the mysterious cabin had it staked, and all the assessments worked to date; and what was more, no one save Hale and Joe knew that the real owner was dead. No doubt he had already taken

a fortune out of it, but just where it was hidden, no one knew at that time.

"What will you take for that pile of sacked silt?" said a big man, who was plainly out of place in a flannel shirt and high boots.

Hale looked him over critically, and then turned to Joe:

"What do you say, Joe?"

"Ten thousand, in cold hard cash," said Joe, expectantly.

"Sold!" said the stranger. "Can I take possession at once?"

"At once," said Joe, with mock courtesy. "Come, Hale, we move out."

Two happy and satisfied men rode into Leavenworth Gulch that evening, and straight to our cabin.

"Ten thousand dollars and one hundred thirty ounces of dust at twenty dollars an ounce, that's not so bad for a few days' work. Now, if Cy just gets well, I'll forgive the doctor for letting our secret out," laughed Hale.

"What is next?" asked Joe.

"I'm going to Denver," said Hale.

"For what?" I asked, in surprise.

"To deposit our money for safe keeping, and to hunt up the United States marshal," replied Hale, a merry twinkle in his eye.

"The United States marshal for what?" I asked, more interested.

"I learned to-day that Jake Henderson is back again. He is living in the cabin below the falls, with the Scotchman. He's been gone since Cy was shot. I suppose he thinks that has all blown over now. I had decided to go to work on my pot-holes next week, but now I dare not do it, with him there. He would shoot me in a second."

Toleman smiled from his bunk with real pleasure. "That was my scheme, Hale, to turn the marshal loose on Jake, but now you have beaten me to it, so go ahead, and luck to you. I'm convinced the old pot is full of gold, but remember you're hunting skunk, and need to have your derringer handy."

"I want to see him with my very own eyes before I start," replied Hale, "so I'm going back to-morrow, just to reconnoiter."

His sudden meeting with Jake on the morrow, however, was somewhat of a surprise to both men.

CHAPTER XX

A CHANCE MEETING IN THE NIGHT

JOE WATSON had decided to go back to the placer again to see what he could do for himself on his own hook, and as Hale had not heard from him, he rode up to talk matters out with him in regard to Jake. The stream was still lined with toiling miners, some jubilant with success, others tired out and discouraged. The boom promised to be short lived, and already some of the lazy ones that could not stand the strenuous back-breaking labor over the pans were preparing to leave.

Hale rode leisurely among them, chatting with this one and that one, when suddenly he turned to look into the muzzle of a pistol. He was promptly ordered to dismount, and was too surprised to disobey. Jake Henderson had gotten the drop. Hale was certain his time had come, when suddenly, from behind, a miner cried out, "Don't, don't you shoot Jake in the back!" Jake's eye shifted

the fleeting part of a second, but that was all that was necessary. The little derringer flashed, and the two men stood facing each other, guns ready.

"I call that a draw," said Joe Watson, from behind. "Both of you hand me your guns. Now, young man, come with me. Jake, you better get. There are a dozen men after you, any one of whom will shoot on sight. There's a plenty that need that reward. I'll give you an hour to get, and then I'll let it out who you are; and when I do, you're same as a dead Indian, for that's a worthwhile reward they're offering for your scalp."

With an oath and a muttered threat, Jake retreated over the ridge, shaking his fist at the two as he disappeared. Hale laughed a dry little laugh before he spoke.

"You saved my life, Joe," he said at length. "Now I want you to go partners with me on a new claim. That's what I came up for. I know it's rich, richer than any yet panned, but it's hard to get at. Will you go?"

"Go anywhere with you, lad," said Joe. "Now when do we begin operations?"

"As soon as I can go to Denver and back,"

replied Hale. "Meanwhile I want you to keep Jake's whereabouts in mind. We can't go to work till we are sure he is safe in hands of the law. I'm going to see the marshal."

"Leave him to me, boy," said Joe. "I'll know where he is when you want him, if you hurry. I have a notion he won't be long in these parts anyway, but best to make certain."

Hale rode in on us that evening and announced that he had located Jake, but did not tell us the little incident in which Joe had come to the rescue.

"How are you, Cy?" Hale asked, earnestly. "Are you soon going to be strong enough to watch operations at the pots? It will be some sight, I'll wager. We are going to make a big stake there, I'm positive—enough to put us all in clover, then I'm going home. Do you hear me?—home!"

"You're wise, pal," said Toleman, cheerily, "and if I am able to go, I am going with you."

The next morning Hale rode down the gulch for Denver. Once there, however, he met an obstacle that he had not counted on.

The marshal was not even interested in his case. In fact, he laughed at Hale, and informed him that he already had a man in prison for the robbery at the Fort a year ago; that Hale must be mistaken. "My man was convicted of the crime on circumstantial evidence, I'll admit," added the marshal, "but it was very strong evidence. Describe this man Jake to me, and let me see about this a bit."

Hale did so, minutely, and at once the marshal was interested.

"You have described the man I have in prison, exactly," he said. Then, turning abruptly, he added:

"Why are you so anxious to have this Jake Henderson apprehended now after a year has lapsed. You realize, of course, that these hills are filled just now with all sorts of bad men from the cities. If I should attempt to arrest them all, I would need a regiment of soldiers behind me."

"But supposing you could regain a large part of that stolen money?" suggested Hale. "Isn't there a reward waiting?"

"That money would prove the case beyond a doubt. What's more, the coin was all

secretly marked, but we have never gotten a trace of a bit of it. But, answer me, sir, why do you so wish his arrest, especially just now?"

"He has sworn to shoot me on sight," said Hale, slowly, "because I was the man that bound him and left him in Widow Gulch for you. He knows that I alone know the facts of his shooting Keats. He has not dared to shoot me, as long as Cy was about; besides, just the right opportunity has not presented itself; but he came near doing so yesterday. I came West, sir, to hunt a fortune, not to kill men, and I do not wish to be compelled to take a human life, even in order to save my own. However, the next time we meet, one of us will lose. I'd much rather have the law take its course, sir."

"It would take an armed posse to capture him if he knew I was after him," drawled the marshal. "I would like to talk to your brother and this Toleman about it too. I'll go to the cabin with you, and we'll decide what is best to do."

"I do not think it wise for us to be seen together on the road," suggested Hale. "I'll take the south trail, cross over the ridge to

the placer, and come into the cabin from the West. You go directly to my uncle's cabin in the gulch. Are you agreed?"

The marshal agreed to this plan, and the two separated, Hale taking the south trail and riding hard in an effort to reach the gambler's cabin before dark. In this he was successful. He did not put his horse in the stable, however, but took him well back upstream into a bit of meadow, and hobbled him. It was indeed fortunate that he was so cautious, for upon his return downstream he heard a faint neigh, apparently at the cabin. Dropping into the thick brush, he waited. By and by a horse and mule were turned loose to feed, and two men, each carrying a heavy sack, entered the cabin and carefully fastened the door from the inside.

Hale lay still a long while, and then quietly began to work his way toward the cabin. An empty ore sack had been nailed across the small window, so that he could not see in, but by carefully working his way around the cabin he found a place where the mud chinking had rattled out. He was making his way to it, when suddenly he tripped over a protruding root and fell head-

long. Instantly he was up and alert to see if he had been discovered. Evidently the rush of water in the stream had drowned the noise of his fall. With trembling hands and shaking knees he worked his way to the crack and peeped in.

The two men sat up to the table, upon which stood four buckskin bags, two of which bulged noticeably, as if filled with chunks of some kind. The crack was so narrow that he could see but a small strip of either man, and unfortunately it lay just about the belt. They were talking earnestly together, and were evidently bargaining about something. Hale removed his eye from the crack and placed his ear to the hole instead. He listened intently, but could not catch all of the conversation. Of this much he was certain, that in the morning the two were going to separate, one going into Mountain City to buy equipment for a long prospecting trip to Leadville, while the other started on with what horses and tools and dust they already had to find a suitable camping spot. The man who was to go into the city was to take the bags of coin with him, with which to make his purchases,

while the second would take care of the two big bags of gold dust.

Suddenly it dawned upon Hale that his men were no other than Jake Henderson and the little Scotchman from the cabin below the falls, and that they were planning their get away. The Scotchman was to buy the grub, while Jake was to await him up Turkey Creek, or, as Hale thought more probable, to make his get away with all the gold dust.

"There have been many robberies of late," said Jake, "and we can't afford to take any chances by taking ours into the city. Nothing is safe here any longer, not even your life, if you happen to have a little gold, and that is why I think we better move on. If you have a little money, they say you stole it, and a mob is onto your trail in no time. Leadville is a new camp, and we'll make a second fortune there."

"So the population is getting too thick for you, is it?" said Hale under his breath, but with great personal satisfaction. "I'm glad you're going. It saves me a nasty mess, that's certain. And what's more, it leaves the pot-holes at last free."

Hale withdrew to a safe place, built him a little fire and prepared to rest a bit before morning. As he sat by his little fire he fell to thinking just what was his duty in regard to Jake. His enemy was leaving, thus his own life was safe and his claim cleared so he could go to work at once, if he chose. When once the pot-holes had yielded their fortune, he was expecting to return home. Why not let Jake go? But he could not get the sight of the bold killing in Widow Gulch out of his head, or of the unwarranted shooting of Cy in which he had no doubt Jake had had a part. To let him go seemed like stirring up a poison viper and then going off and leaving it to endanger others. Somehow it didn't seem fair. Had there been nothing but his own personal grievance to consider, he would have dropped the matter; but there was the safety of the whole valley to consider. As he sat meditating, an idea came to him. The marshal had told him that the gold coin stolen near the Fort had been marked. It was with this coin that Jake's pal was now to buy provisions, he was sure. If there were any doubt, the marshal could examine the coins thus spent

in Mountain City, and then follow up the provision train and ride in on Jake. The evidence would then be secure and he would not need to figure in the arrest at all. This plan suited him, and he determined upon it.

With the first streaks of dawn the two men left the cabin. Hale, from his hiding place, made certain that they were really Jake and his pal, and then returned to his own horse, saddled, rode over the high ridge around the base of the cliff where Cy had been taken prisoner, then down into the placer field. There he met Joe, and learned from him that Jake had left, bag and baggage. He expressed surprise, but did not betray his secret, even to Joe.

The two men then sat down, and Hale carefully told Joe of his proposed scheme at the pot-holes, and suggested that, so long as Jake was gone, they better get to work. At once the two men rode to the odd claim, and finding the place absolutely deserted, staked it anew and prepared to go to work. In the late afternoon Hale left Joe in charge, to make some tests and look over the property, while he rode in to meet the marshal, according to his agreement. The marshal

was very vexed that Hale had kept him waiting so long, but upon learning of the new development he regained his humor and set off at once for Mountain City to follow up the new clue of the marked coins.

Cy was fast improving, and would be able to get around a little in another two weeks, if he had no set back. He was very anxious to go to the pot-holes and watch the developments, but Hale forbade. We divided what provisions there were left, and in the morning he set out again, confident that the new claim held our fortune, and promised to soon prove it.

Joe greeted him with enthusiasm.

"I've an idea, lad," he called, "the very first one of any value in many moons. You see that granite crag to the left of the falls, don't you?"

Hale gazed in the indicated direction, wondering what a granite crag above the falls could possibly have to do with the gold in the pot-holes.

"Yes," he said. "What about it, Joe? There are hundreds of them all up and down the valley. What you going to do—ship it to a museum?"

Joe was too interested in his scheme to joke, so proceeded to explain.

"Eight cans of powder will topple it over and divert that whole stream of water into a new channel. The pot-holes will then be dry, and we could work them with ease."

Hale stared at his partner in boylike admiration, the significance of such a move suddenly dawning upon him.

"Why, Joe, you are a regular wonder!" he cried delightedly; and then his face fell.

"But where will we ever get eight cans of powder? It is worth fifty dollars a can in Denver, and a hundred and fifty in the Gulch, if, in fact, there is that much to be had at all."

"But I *have* the powder," cried Joe, gleefully. "That's what suggested it all to me."

"You have eight cans of powder?" said Hale, incredulously. "Where ever did you get them? These placer miners didn't have it, I'll wager."

"No," laughed Joe, "but come with me."

He led Hale back through the brush over that same dim trail to the hidden stable Cy had discovered on their second trip to the pots' mouths before. Together they entered,

and there, neatly stacked against the rock wall, stood eight cans of powder, a jug of quicksilver, a half dozen shovels, two rusty picks, and a half dozen placer pans, every one of which had been stolen from our mill the time we were first robbed and the attempt made to blow us up.

"Luck! pure luck!" cried Hale. "Now let's get at that cliff. We'll rig a camp in that old tumbled-down cabin. It will do us very well for the short time we'll be here."

CHAPTER XXI

JOE WATSON'S BLAST

THEY spent most of the day getting things shaped up and ready for the blasting.

"It will take us several days to get the powder up to where we want to use it and to get our holes properly drilled, won't it?" asked Hale.

"Yes, the drilling in that bald old cliff will be very hard work, but it will prove very much worth while. We will make our first trip in the morning while it's cool."

"I'll ride over to the cabin in the Gulch and bring a few sharp drills, a sledge or two, and a roll of fuse. There is a bundle of it that has been hanging over there since last fall."

For the next few days the two men were very busy with the drilling and with hauling the powder up to the base of the great cliff. The day for the big blast finally came. Cy

insisted that he was amply able to take care of himself for one day, and so I rode over to see the celebration. Reluctantly I left Cy behind, but only after I had put everything that he might need within easy reach. I cooked him his dinner, expecting to be back by night, if all went well. The mine fuse was led back through a grove of immense spruce that stood in a draw at one end of the cliff. Hale and I, having removed the provisions from the cabin and the horses from the shed, climbed up the opposite cliff to watch the culmination of Joe's engineering. After several moments we saw Joe appear up the valley, hatless, his sleeves flying. He waved to us, and we both waited eagerly for him to reach us.

Suddenly there was a low rumble, like distant thunder, and then a sharp report, followed in quick succession by others. The great pinnacle seemed to rock gently, much as a pile of blocks would do if the bottom one should be suddenly kicked out. The loose boulders began to roll, and soon a perfect avalanche of rock and dirt descended into the stream. Our eyes were riveted on the great crag above. Slowly it toppled

over, then fell headlong, directly into the stream and just above the falls.

We waved our hats frantically, to let Joe know all was well. He had circled across and was coming toward us. In a few moments he joined us on the ledge and gazed down with satisfaction at the destruction below. The water rapidly backed up until it was perhaps twenty feet deep, and then began to flow over the obstruction at the low end, leading the water down a side gulch that emptied back into the main stream fifty yards below our cabin.

When we were sure it was safe to descend, we hurried down, for miners were coming from up the valley, like bees out of a bee hive, to see what had happened, many believing it was an earthquake or a terrific landslide.

Joe took his place at the rim of the big polished granite pot and told the curious prospectors "that far and no farther," while Hale and I waded into the cold water up to our armpits and began to throw out the rock that had slid in from the blast.

The crowd of spectators were skeptical. Nevertheless every claim in the dry stream

bed up to the very edge of "discovery" was almost instantly staked; a little detail that we had entirely overlooked in our excitement. There were so many miners about that we deemed it necessary to guard the claim all night. Accordingly, I decided to stay and take my turn. It was well I did, for long before morning there was much squabbling on the lower claims, and many disputes as to just where the "discovery" ended.

At daylight Joe began to rig a crude windlass across the upper pot, while Hale began the construction of a big cradle from a section of hollow log. The miners hung about expectantly, waiting to see what the pots would produce, but Joe refused to pan a particle of the dirt until all the preliminary work was finished, all of which he made go just as slowly as he could, in order to thin out the envious crowd.

Shortly before noon I felt I must return to Cy, as he would be greatly in need of me. Joe assured me that I was not needed longer at the claim, so I rode off down the valley, promising to return the next day to get the news and to bring new provisions.

I reached our cabin about four, and found it occupied by a strange assembly. Seeing the six horses and a mule that were tied in front, I knew something unusual had happened, so hurried in. Cy was propped up in the corner of his bunk. To his right stood the marshal with three other miners who were strangers to me. Seated just in front of them were Jake Henderson and the strange little Scotchman, whom I at once guessed to be Jake's pal. They were both in hand-cuffs, and tied securely besides.

Cy was telling of his acquaintance with Jake from the very beginning. I stood silent and listened. Jake's eyes were on the floor, and he scarcely moved during the entire story. I noted that Cy took great care to leave Hale in the background just as much as possible. When he came to that part of the narrative that had to do with Jake's proposal to me to buy his freedom, I insisted upon speaking for myself, but made it as brief as possible, not alluding in any way to there being any connection whatever between the two thousand dollars Jake had offered me for freedom and the two thousand dollars that had been stolen near the

Fort; in fact, I did not even let on that I knew of the robbery at all.

"And where did you come across this Henderson, sir?" asked the sheriff, turning abruptly to the little Scotchman.

"I was passing his cabin in Widow Gulch on a little prospecting trip," replied the miner, "when I heard a strange sound. Thinking some one had done dirt and locked some prospector up, and perhaps robbed him, I battered down the door, and found this man. He was so weak from hunger that I had to feed him. And then he told me of how he had been beaten and tied, because he refused to give up his secret as to where there was a rich claim, and told me he would take me in as a pard if I'd do just as he said. I agreed, for I was broke, and then we moved to the Falls and built a shack.

"I kept it while he went to work the secret claim. He was gone nights a good deal, but often returned with a quantity of dust. When we got too much he took some of it to Denver, to deposit, he said. I finally suspected he was not getting it all honestly, and asked him about it. He flew into a rage, and threatened to kill me, adding, 'Why

need a man steal it when the hills are full of it?' Another man often came to the cabin, on a gray horse, and they would go outside and talk for hours; but finally he stopped coming, and I never saw him again."

"Did you know that Jake had quantities of gold coin in his possession?" asked the sheriff.

"That I did not, sir," replied the Scotchman, "until we decided to leave and go to the new fields. He told me then his vein had about pinched out and that he had sold it for cash. That night he brought the bags of coin. The next day we started, and I was sent on into the city to get provisions, which I did. You know the rest."

Evidently, the marshal was entirely satisfied, for he said, after a thoughtful moment or two, turning to Cy:

"You say you are expecting to return to the States soon, Mr. Toleman?"

"Yes," replied Cy. "Just as soon as I can travel in safety and can dispose of my interests here. Hale hopes to enter college this fall, I believe, with the little stake we have made here. It would be a great deal more of a fortune if I hadn't gotten in the

way of that miserable bullet, and could have helped, instead of lying here."

"It's a pity it didn't get you worse than it did," snarled Jake. "I'll tell what I know of that shooting when the time comes. It was you, sir, that killed Craig, as I have plenty of evidence to prove, and then burned his body in his shack to cover your crime."

"So that blackguard was your partner too, was he?" cried Toleman. "I was always sure that you were his assistant. As sheriff of the Leavenworth Vigilantes, I have plenty of evidence of many robberies to hang you, sir. I promise you, if the marshal were not taking you away, you would come to speedy justice."

"And when the proper time comes I'll tell what I know of the tragedy in Widow Gulch," I cried, hotly. "I suppose you have told your partner all about your affair with Keats?"

"We'll be off," said the marshal. Then turning to Toleman, he added: "I'll expect you to stop off at the Fort, sir, and tell what you know of this affair to the commandant in whose hands the matter was placed."

"I'll do it willingly, sir," said Cy, "and

we'll hope that it won't be many weeks from now, either. Let me warn you, sir: watch your prisoner closely. He is as slick as an eel, and far more dangerous. I've come to believe that his life is well-nigh charmed, or else he's so mean the devil won't have him."

CHAPTER XXII

GOLD AT LAST—AND HOME!

THE first cradleful of black silt taken from the big pot so delighted Joe and Hale that they fairly went wild with excitement. At last every golden dream was coming true! Each pot held a fortune, and although it had been kept a secret for ages by the powerful waterfall, at last it was yielding it up to the wits of man.

There were so many eager prospectors lounging about to see just what the dirt would yield that, upon Joe's suggestion, we decided to only semiwash it, sack the roughly refined dirt and carry it to our cabin in the Gulch for the final wash. In this way we were able to keep the richness of our discovery a mystery and get the valuable dirt to safety much quicker.

I rode out each day and brought home a goodly bag of the rich earth, and put it in Cy's care. He was up and about a bit each day now, but dared not attempt to ride to

the pot-hole claim. Day after day the two toiled on, scarcely taking time to eat, often stumbling into their bunks at night without even removing their wet and muddy clothing. They were slowly growing exhausted with the labor, for there proved to be nearly eight feet of silt in the big pot, and over five in the second. This aggregated several tons of coarse dirt in all that had to be washed. There proved to be very few bowlders in either pot, and for this we were glad. The day they struck bottom and the last pound was hoisted to the surface, Joe sat down and cried from nervous exhaustion. Hale looked at him in consternation, and then deliberately threw away his shovel.

"There is no use in the world of acting like the stuff was going to run away," he said. "What fools we are. I'm going to rest a few days now, and do a bit of fishing and hunting, for I'm getting so that I'm almost ashamed to look a ham in the face. A piece of fresh meat is what we both need—and sleep."

Accordingly, both men put up their shovels and pans, shouldered their rifles and went off for a hunt, while I sat guard

at the claim. It was while I was so engaged, that word came of the discovery of a great bag of gold dust that had been hidden by the gambler under the floor of his cabin. It proved to be a small fortune, and created no little excitement. The result was that every abandoned cabin in the hills was promptly overhauled in search for hidden treasure.

For this reason, I was a bit fearful of Cy's being left alone, for it was well known that we had much dust somewhere. Late the next evening Joe and Hale returned to camp, refreshed, each with a quarter of deer. We cooked up a big supper, ate our fill, and slept, for the large majority of the miners in the valley were off hunting treasure as a result of the cabin excitement.

After satisfying ourselves that we had all that was worth the panning, we packed up what we wanted from the claim and moved home to the big cabin, to do the final washing. Hale had twenty-nine small nuggets, which he said were for the gods; but I happened to know of a promise that he had made to a certain little lady to bring home a necklace of pure gold nuggets. We tried to get him to tell us about it, but he became

confused, and so we did not urge the matter farther.

In twelve days more we had the dust all washed, and gathered about the scales to weigh it up. There were sixty-nine pounds of pure metal, worth approximately twenty-five thousand dollars. Then there was the money from the sacked dirt at the placer, and some other odds and ends that we had saved. We divided, as per our agreement, with Joe, selling him our cabin and outfit for a thousand dollars, Joe agreeing in turn to haul us into Denver and help us get started home.

"I want to ride back up to that cliff cave once more, where I was slated to die, before we go home," said Cy. "I have an idea in my head that won't be gone. I've dreamed it these weeks. Say, boys, what was that hidden cave there for, anyway?"

We went on horseback as far as we could, and then by easy stages we helped Cy climb to where the old lean-to had stood before we burned it. Cy directed us to pull away the burned debris from the shelves of granite rock.

"Examine them closely, boys," he said.

"I can't see why that gambling stranger ever came up here if it wasn't to hide something. May have been just to hide himself, but that don't seem probable. I believe there is gold, stolen gold, for that one bag at the cabin couldn't have been all."

On the topmost ledge, under a pile of dry sticks, that resembled an old abandoned eagle's nest, we unearthed three buckskin bags. Two held retorted gold—perhaps twenty-five pounds in all, while the other, which was the larger and heavier one, was filled with placer dust. We held them up triumphantly, for suddenly, as if by magic, our fortune had more than doubled.

"That makes our pile over seventy thousand dollars, don't it?" grinned Cy. "Jerusalem! but that's good pay for a picnic!"

We had been so busy with our own affairs and the exciting adventures that had befallen us since my uncle's departure that we had paid little or no attention to the war talk that was filtering out from the States. However, upon reaching Denver we found the city in a state of great turmoil. A large company of Georgia miners had just departed for the South, and heated arguments

could be found going on at almost every corner. The Southerners were buying up all the guns and ammunition that were available and the Northern Yankees were making wild threats of what the North would do when once she got into action.

Toleman listened with great interest to it all, and apparently was doing much thinking. Several times I observed him and Hale in serious talk, but it did not occur to me for some time what was in their minds, until one day I overheard Hale say, with determination:

"If you go, I go with you. Our scouting practice ought to be an asset to us."

We took passage for Omaha in a stout prairie schooner drawn by four big mules. The owner of the wagon and his wife were returning East after a short stay in the gold camp. She was an excellent cook, and we certainly did credit to every meal. We ate pie for the first time since leaving home, and the event was the occasion for much merriment. We slept on the ground, except when we came to small ranches, and then we indulged in a haystack or a barn loft. Hale and I kept the table supplied with small

game, while Cy took complete charge of our fortune, never leaving it day or night. We had it divided into numerous small bags, so that it was quite easy to handle, and created no special interest on the part of our friends and drivers. We met several bands of inquisitive Indians, but finding us well armed they would always parley, perhaps trade a bit, and then go away in peace. The government had very severely punished a number of raiding bands, so that travel on the main roads was comparatively safe.

At last we reached the Fort, and as Cy had agreed, we stopped over to tell what we knew of Jake. We found, however, that he had made a complete confession, and had been sent on East for trial, so after a little visit with the commandant we pushed on toward home.

We came to several small camps of Sioux along the Platte, but they paid very little attention to us. But just ten days out from the Fort, we came upon a mounted band of Pawnee warriors, who stopped us and asked us if we had seen any Sioux, and how many. We told them that we had, and gave them the particulars. The driver presented them

with a fine big ham, and soon they rode away.

The next time we were not so fortunate, and probably it was only Cy's quick thinking that saved our treasure, for he saw them coming and hastily buried our bags of gold in the hay stack. They surrounded our camp and demanded gold. Only a search of our entire outfit satisfied them that there was none to be had. We learned soon afterward, from a party that had been robbed by the same band, that the Indians had learned that the yellow dust would buy fire-water at the trading posts and they were always on the lookout for it.

We reached Omaha from Denver in twenty days. There we bade good-by to our friend and his wife, paying them handsomely for their service. Then we took stage for Iowa City, and from there home by train. We insisted that Cy stay with us as long as he would, for he had become like a brother to us boys. We talked almost incessantly for a week with friends who called to welcome us back, and the papers made good stock of our success. Cy insisted that he would feel better if he knew that

Jake's wife was provided for in some way, for he had learned that he had left her without a penny and that she had been very sick all the winter. Accordingly, he and my uncle arranged it through the local bank so that the little old body, which had never known much but poverty and hardship, had a monthly payment, supposedly from Jake, who was somewhere in the West.

One evening, supper over, we all sat in the parlor, each one in his accustomed place, just as we had before our expedition, only now Hale was reading war news in the daily instead of studying his books.

"I suppose," said my uncle, addressing Hale, "that you will plan on entering college in the fall, to prepare for your chosen vocation?"

Hale laid the paper down and gazed out of the window before he spoke, then he fairly startled us by his reply.

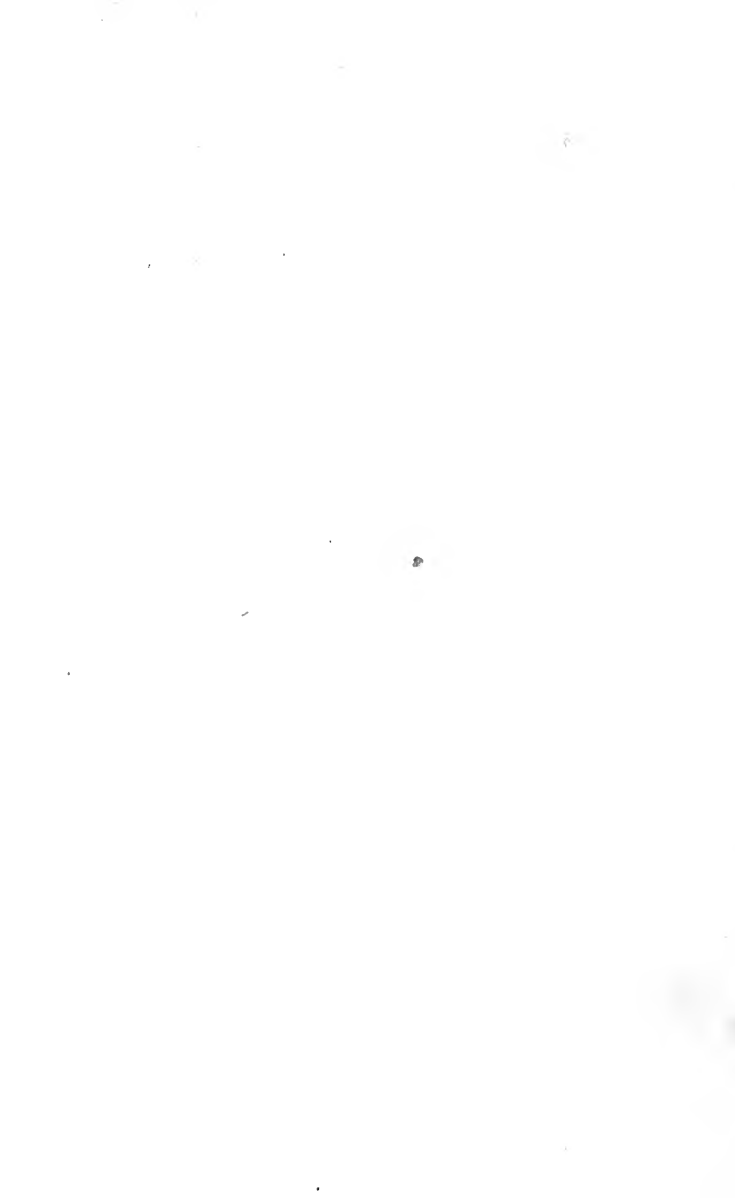
"Not this fall, uncle," he said, earnestly. "I have changed my mind. My country is calling for volunteers. There is a great principle at stake. I must go."

My uncle's eyes flashed, and I noted that Cy was alert not to miss a word.

"Then we enlist together," he finally said, "and we'll do it to-morrow. It's my country too."

"And mine," said my uncle, "but I am too old. God bless you, boys. I know you will bring your country nothing but honor."





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